



DUGONG

Dugongs (*Dugong dugon*) are air breathing, herbivorous mammals that feed almost exclusively on sea grass, and is the only species left in the family Dugongidae. In Australian waters, Dugongs range from southern Queensland, through the northern coastal waters and to Shark Bay in Western Australia. They are found in the shallow, coastal areas where the water is warmer and large areas of sea grass are available. In WA, the number of Dugongs in Ningaloo Reef, Shark Bay and Exmouth Gulf is estimated to be approximately 14,400. These animals have excellent eyesight and hearing, and have the ability to swim at up to 20 kilometres per hour.

Dugongs can grow to around 3 metres, and will often reach a weight of around 400 kilograms. They have downward-facing snouts with two nostrils and a very large, hairy upper lip that is adapted for bottom feeding. Dugongs have valves that keep their nostrils closed while they are underwater, where they can stay for around 6 minutes before needing to come to the surface for air. These animals have a very heavy skeleton, which allows them to stay on the sea floor whilst feeding. Also, fully grown males and some females have short tusks that they use for uprooting seagrass, and the males also use them for fighting.

Dugongs have been given the nickname 'sea cows' due to the way they graze on the sea grass meadows in warm, shallow waters. They will often consume the entire seagrass plant, even the roots and leave characteristic 'feeding trails' of uprooted beds. Dugongs must consume a very large amount of sea grass to sustain themselves, around 21-36 kilograms every day. Seagrass is quite hard for the animal to digest, so their large intestine is extremely thick and is around 30 metres long! Dugongs can also feed on crustaceans and molluscs.

These animals reach adulthood when they are between 10 and 17 years of age. Dugongs have a gestation period of about 13 months, and give birth underwater to a single calf that weighs up to 35 kilograms! Being mammals, dugong calves feed on their mothers' milk until they are around 18 months old, and will start eating seagrass soon after birth. A female dugong will give birth every 3 to 7 years throughout their life, usually to a single calf.

On a global level, the Dugong is considered 'Vulnerable to Extinction'. Their predators include Sharks, and Killer Whales, but these are not the cause of their decline in numbers. Coastal development and water pollution (including oil spills) are very damaging to seagrass, on which the Dugongs are dependent for survival. Dugongs also have a history of being hunted for their meat and oil. Their slow reproduction rate is also a contributing factor in their declining numbers.

Did you know?

The Dugong is thought to be the origin of the myth of the 'Mermaid' due to the shape of its tail and body.