

ANDAMAN STATE ANIMAL- DUGONG



The dugong is the state animal of Andaman, also known as the sea cow, which can be found mainly in Little Andaman. It belongs to Dugongidae family and is the only species left but even this species survival is critical and declining o rapid rate due to poaching. It has a lifespan of 70 years and is popularly known as the Lady of the sea.

Distribution and Habitat

The dugong can be found throughout the warm latitudes of the Indian and western Pacific Oceans. Dugongs can be quite large, reaching lengths of more than 13 feet (4 m) and weights more than one metric tonne.



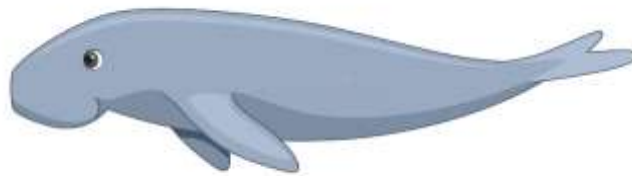
The dugong, like all sea cows, is herbivorous. It primarily grazes on sea grasses and therefore spends most of its time in sea grass beds. Unlike the closely related manatees, the dugong never enters freshwater and is therefore the only exclusively marine mammal that is herbivorous.

The dugong has some or **complete legal protection** throughout most of its range, but it is still hunted in some places and is threatened by habitat destruction, collision with boats, and accidental capture in fisheries targeting other species throughout most of its range. Populations are depleted in some places and regionally extinct in others, and scientists believe the dugong to be vulnerable to extinction. Without careful management of the human activities that threaten the dugong, it could be lost from more places.



Characteristics of Dugongs

- **Herbivorous Mammals:** Dugongs along are sea cows because their diet consists mainly of grasses in the sea and are the only herbivorous mammals in the sea with the characteristics of that of a cow. They ingest the entire plant while eating including the roots and are mainly a docile animal that lives deep inside the sea.
- **Thawtee:** In Andaman Island, it is known as sea-pigs or pani-suwar (thawtee). The name given to this mammal is primarily because of its body frame, size and eating habits.
- **Back Defense:** The defending part of Dugong's body is their back, where most of the blubber is deposited. They are not very aggressive animals neither they attack small fishes nor they indulge in fights. They show their back to the attackers and predators which is their self-defense mechanism and helps them to easily escape the attack.
- Dugongs reproduce via internal fertilization and give birth to large young, which they nurse for as long as a year and a half. Adult dugongs do not have any natural predators, but juveniles may be eaten by saltwater crocodiles, killer whales, and large, coastal sharks.
- The dugong's brain is very small compared to its body size, likely because it does not have to develop complex hunting strategies to capture prey.



Threat and Danger:

- Currently, they are classified as vulnerable to extinction under the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, as they are vulnerable to human activities due to their life history and dependence on sea grasses that are restricted to coastal habitats.
- Dugongs are threatened by sea grass habitat loss or degradation because of coastal development or industrial activities that cause water pollution. If there is not enough sea grass to eat then the dugong does not breed normally. This makes the conservation of their shallow water marine habitat very important. They also often become victims of bycatch, the accidental entanglement in fishing nets.
- It has been hunted for meat and oil for centuries which has led to decrease in their number. In India also, its meat is considered to be aphrodisiac and essential for oil. Reasons for the waning population are squalor, gill netting, chemical pollutants, large-scale indigenous use and hunting.



Did you know?

In Andaman, there are hardly 50 in number and their survival is the key concern for the government of the Andaman Islands.

India's effort to save them:

The maximum population of Dugong is restricted to the Red Sea, followed by the Persian Gulf. Less than 200 dugongs are available and India is encouraging its neighbors in South Asia to sign the Dugong UNEP/CMS MOU as early as possible.

In Andaman:

- In Andaman and Nicobar islands, dugongs are mainly found along "Dugong Creek" in the Little Andaman Island. They have also been found in other parts such as the Ritchies archipelago in Neil Island and some parts of Havelock group of islands, South Andaman (along Tarmugli, Jolly buoy and Rutland islands), North and middle Andaman (along White-Cliff, Reef, Landfall islands and Mayabunder region), in Hutbay and along the central group of Nicobar Islands. There are about fifty dugongs that live in the Andaman and Nicobar region but their survival is critical as the corals are declining and poaching is increasing.
- Commercialization of Dugong is a threat to already endangered species of Dugong and The Forest Department and Nature Conservation Foundation in association with the Andaman and Nicobar Environment team is attempting to conserve these animals and create a natural habitat that will help them to reproduce and live peacefully.
- Awareness: Identifying the habitats of the mysterious species and creating awareness amongst the local people like the fishermen, boat owners, and others to reduce poaching-related threats is the first step towards preserving these docile sea mammals.
- The state animal of Dugong is undoubtedly the rare water mammal found in India and abroad but the threat of extinction and commercialization of the dugong trade may lead to its extinction. So apart from government initiatives, even localities and tourists should spread awareness regarding this animal and help to create a natural environment for it to breed and live.



Facts About Dugongs

1. Dugongs grow to a maximum length of 13 feet (4 m) long and weight of 595 pounds (270 kg).
2. Dugongs can live up to 70 years.
3. Dugongs are referred to as sea cows because they use their strong, cleft upper lips to graze on sea grasses they uproot from the seafloor.
4. Dugongs are sirenians and therefore related to manatees. Though they resemble cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises), dugongs and manatees are believed to be descendants of land mammals that make them more closely related to elephants than whales.
5. Dugongs live only in coastal waters of the Pacific and Indian Oceans from east Africa to the Red Sea and Australia.



When is the World Dugong Day celebrated? Write a short note on the significance of the day.

Fill Up:

When the Dugong was first discovered? _____

Which country has the largest population of Dugong? _____

Dugong is said to be similar to which of the other marine animal? _____

Other rare animal indigenous to Andaman's? _____

References:

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