



# Dugongs in the Northern Territory

Globally, the dugong (*Dugong dugon*) is listed as 'vulnerable' by IUCN. Concern about the global status of dugong populations is also recognised by listings under Convention for the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Australia is considered to be the global stronghold of the dugong which is a listed migratory and a listed marine species under the EPBC Act 1999, and protected by State/Territory legislation in the range states of Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland.

Dugongs are marine mammals. They are warm blooded, breath air, and suckle their young. They even have sparse hair. Dugongs have a dolphin like tail and paddle like flippers. Their small eyes give them poor sight but they have good hearing. They feed using a large fleshy lip and uproot vegetation using their tusks .

Dugongs belong to the order Sirenia, with also includes three species of manatee, two of which occur in the Americas with the other occurring in western Africa. The dugongs next closest relative is not another marine creature, but the elephant.

## Life History

Dugongs have a similar life history to humans. They reach maturity between 10 and 17 years and have one calf at a time. This calf suckles from the mother for between 14 and 18 months. Dugongs do not breed every year but anywhere from 2.5 to seven years. They are estimated to live for over 70 years. With low reproductive rates dugongs are vulnerable to exploitation and incidental death by humans.

## Distribution

The range of dugongs extends from eastern Africa to the western Pacific. Australia appears to be the last stronghold for the worlds dugong stocks with an estimated 80, 000 still living its waters. In Australia, dugongs are distributed along the northern coastline from Moreton Bay near Brisbane to Shark Bay in Western Australia.

In the NT, large numbers of dugongs occur in the Gulf of Carpentaria and Arnhem Land with fewer on the western coast of the NT. Herds of over 100 can still be seen around the Sir Edward Pellew Islands, near Borroloola.



Photo: S. Whiting.



Global distribution of dugongs. Red indicates high densities, pink areas indicate low densities or remnant populations.



Seagrass and dugong feeding trails on Casuarina Beach. Photos: S. Penny.

## Feeding and Habitat

Dugongs feed predominantly on seagrass (including the roots). Their feeding trails look like winding grooves in the mud from where they have uprooted plants. These can be seen at Casuarina Beach in Darwin at very low tides.

Dugongs usually occur in inshore bays, islands and around coral reef islands that support seagrass. In the Darwin region dugongs are also associated with rocky reefs and can often be seen from the Channel Island bridge where they are assumed to be feeding on algae (seaweed).

## Conservation and Threats

- Drowning in inshore net fisheries
- Unsustainable harvest by Indigenous peoples
- Boat strike
- Habitat destruction
- Climate change

## Research Methods

- Aerial surveys
- Satellite tracking
- Community sightings
- Stranding database

## How quickly it happens! The Extinction of Steller's Sea Cow

Steller's sea cow became extinct only 27 years after it was discovered in the 18th century. This member of the order Sirenia was discovered in the Bering Sea in the northern hemisphere in 1741. It grew to 8 m in length and reached a mass of between 5400 and 11000 kg. It became extinct in 1768 after being harvested for meat and fat.

## Useful Websites

United Nations Environment Program: <http://www.unep.org/dewa/reports/dugongreport.asp>  
Great Barrier Reef Marine Park: <http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/>  
World Conservation Union: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/search/details.php/6909/all>  
Australian Government: <http://www.environment.gov.au/coasts/species/dugongs/index.html>  
Australian Museum: <http://www.amonline.net.au/factSheets/dugong.htm>

For more information contact the **Marine Biodiversity Group**.  
Email: [marine.nretas@nt.gov.au](mailto:marine.nretas@nt.gov.au) **Web:** [www.nt.gov.au/marine](http://www.nt.gov.au/marine)