

DUGONG

What are they called?

Scientific:

Dugong dugon

Common English: Dugong, Sea Cow

French: Dugong

Bislama: Kaofis

Vernacular: There are many vernacular names e.g.:
Pongponglo (Vanualava),
Puendras (South-east
Malekula) Bondas (Epi)
Kaunamu (SouthTanna)

What do they look like?

Dugongs are large marine mammals, closely related to Manatees. They can grow up to 3 m in length and weigh up to 500 Kg. They have a thick layer of fat giving them distinctly rotund body. They have a flat mouth facing downwards so they can eat seagrass at the sea floor. They have powerful fluked tail like dolphins and whales. They do not have a dorsal fin.

A little about them:

Dugongs are herbivores (plant-eaters) that feed mostly on seagrass, up to 40 Kg every day. Female dugongs have their first calf when they are between 7 and 17 years. They have calves every 2 - 5 years depending on the quality and quantity of the seagrass available. If there is not much seagrass the time between calves will be longer the females will mature and have their first calf later.

They live in many countries in the Pacific and Indian ocean basins. They can be found in coastal regions of the tropics and sub-tropics, usually found where there is seagrass in shallow calm waters protected from strong waves.



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Did you know?

- Dugongs closest land relatives are elephants.
- Dugongs have lungs and need to come to the surface to breathe about every 6 minutes.
- Dugongs can dive up to 36 meters deep.
- Dugongs swim at about 10 km/hour when cruising but can swim in bursts of 20 km/hr.

Dugongs are classified on the IUCN Red List as Vulnerable (VU) to extinction

Why are they threatened?

- Caught in fishing nets.
- Hit by boats and cut by propellers.
- Declines in seagrass meadows for example due to:
 - Poor water quality as a result of run-off from the land.
 - Coastal development.
 - Damage by boats anchors.



What do they do for us?

- They are friendly, curious animals and seeing them can make us feel happy.
- Has high cultural value for some communities.
- Sometimes referred to as the “gardeners of the sea” as they plough the sea floor and mix the nutrients while feeding thereby playing an important role in nutrient cycling.
- The regular presence of dugongs is an indicator of a healthy seagrass bed.
- Attraction to tourists.

What we can do for them?

- ✓ Don't leave fishing nets unattended in area where dugong are regularly seen.
- ✓ Properly dispose old unwanted fishing nets.
- ✓ Be careful when using boats and anchors over seagrass beds.
- ✓ Know where your seagrass areas are, monitor them and keep them healthy.
- ✓ Report any dugong sighting to VESS.

Want to know more?

- ❖ Read our Booklet on Dugongs and their seagrass habitats by Christina Shaw
- ❖ Read Ecology and Conservation of the Sirenia by Helene Marsh, Thomas J. O'shea & John E. Reynolds III
- ❖ Visit: www.iucnredlist.org
- ❖ Visit: www.dugongconservation.org

