

Dugongs

What are dugongs?

Like whales and dolphins, dugongs (*Dugong dugon*) live their entire life in the sea. These mammals are sometimes called sea cows or manatees. Dugongs are grey in colour and renowned for their flat snout with front nostrils and sensitive bristles and round shape. Unlike other marine mammals, dugongs cannot hold their breath for very long. Their nostrils, located at the top of their snout, allow them to breathe easily with most of their body still under water. These gentle creatures manoeuvre by using their two flippers and swim relatively slowly and gracefully by moving their distinct broad spade-like tail up and down.¹ Their eyes and ears are positioned on the side of their head and when fully grown, dugongs may be three metres long and weigh up to 450 kilograms.²

Dugongs can live as long as 70 years.¹ Females reach reproductive maturity at 6–17 years, and produce a single calf after a 14 month gestation period every 2–2.5 years.¹ They usually give birth in warm, sheltered waters, where it is safe for the calves to stay with and suckle the mother for up to 18 months.¹



A dugong eating seagrass (Source: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, 2011)



A dugong reaching for air (Source: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, 2011)

Where are they found on the Gold Coast?

Dugongs are herbivorous and their main food source is seagrass (see *Seagrass of the Gold Coast* information sheet). They can eat up to 50kg (wet weight) of seagrass per day, due to their astonishingly long intestine—did you know that it can be as thick as a fire hose and stretch to 30m long?² This means dugongs are usually found in calm, sheltered waters, where there is an abundance of seagrass to graze on.²

There is an important population of dugongs in the Moreton Bay Marine Park. On the Gold Coast, they can very occasionally be seen around Wave Break Island, Marine Stadium (The Spit), Crab Island, near the sheltered shores of South Stradbroke Island and the southern points of the Southern Moreton Bay Islands.

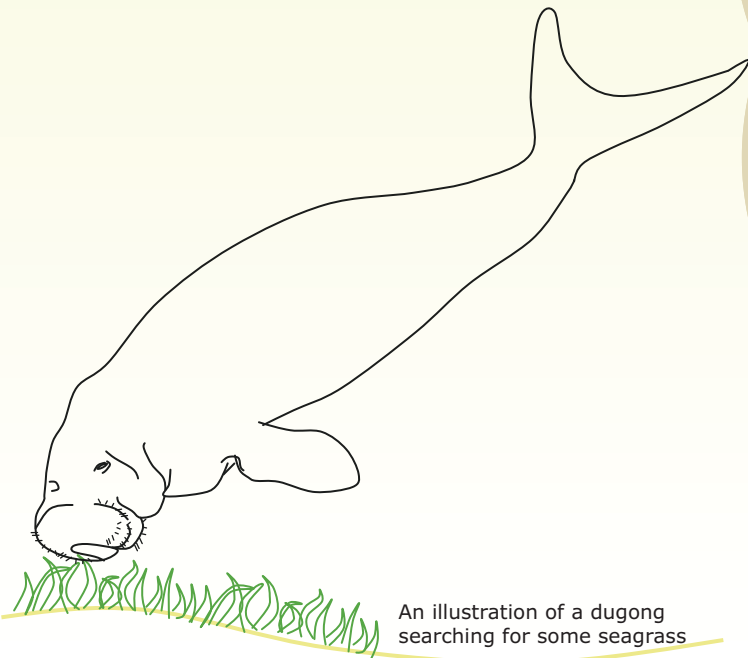
Potential threats to dugongs

- Unsustainable fishing practices
- Destruction to seagrass - dugong habitats
- Boat strikes

The once thriving dugong population of Moreton Bay Marine Park (tens of thousands), is now down to 600–800 individuals.³ They are listed under the IUCN Red List as being vulnerable to extinction.

Why are dugongs important?

Like every grain of sand and every species in our coastal environment, dugongs have a part to play. Dugongs perform essential ecological services, including regulating seagrass populations. The amount of seagrass that these mammals are capable of consuming also makes them an important part of the nutrient cycle.



A dugong playing
(Source: Blanche Danastas, Australian Marine Wildlife)

What are GCCC and other organisations doing to protect dugongs?

Gold Coast City Council is currently undertaking a comprehensive Coastal Ecological Inventory Plan that will recommend a number of strategies to protect dugongs and their habitat. This will complement the seagrass mapping project and other coastal ecological projects. Local universities, marine and coastal organisations and grass-root community groups are busy finding out where, when and why dugongs frequent our waters and how to ensure their continued survival.

What can you do?

- ◆ Collect fishing debris
- ◆ Be aware of the Green and Go Slow zones in Moreton Bay Marine Park
- ◆ Use propeller guards on your watercraft
- ◆ Use environmentally friendly detergents at home to prevent pollution entering the sea
- ◆ Adopt a Seagrass Watch site and help find out how to save these beautiful mammals of the sea

¹ Australian Government Great Barrier Marine Park Authority (2007) Dugongs

² Department of Environment and Conservation (2010) Dugong (*Dugong dugon*), Shark Bay World Heritage Area Fact Sheet

³ Australian Marine Conservation Society - Save Moreton Bay