

Dugongs

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Dugongs and their habitats are at risk due to human activities. It has also found a place in IUCN red list. Hence it is necessary to study about the animal, threats to it and conservation efforts both from prelims and mains point of view.

In news Dugongs, the world's only vegetarian marine mammal are threatened with extinction.

Placing it in syllabus Environment – Fauna

Dimensions

- About Dugongs
- Habitats in India and world
- Threats
- Conservation efforts

Content

About Dugongs:

- The dugong is commonly known as **sea cow**.
- They are marine species like sea turtles, seahorses, sea cucumbers and others.
- They are protected in India under **Schedule I of the Wild Life Protection Act, 1972**.
- The **IUCN** lists the dugong as a species **vulnerable** to extinction and the **CITES** limits or **bans the trade of derived products**.
- According to the **2013 survey report** of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), **there were just 250 dugongs in the Gulf of Mannar in Tamil Nadu, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Gulf of Kutch in Gujarat**.
- In 2020 dugongs will be counted with the help of underwater drone cameras.
- Dugongs **graze on seagrass** in shallow coastal waters.

- They can consume up to 40 kilograms of seagrass in a day.

Habitats in India and world:

- The dugong spans the waters of some **40 countries** and are **found in warm coastal waters from the western Pacific Ocean to the eastern coast of Africa.**
- It is **restricted to the coastal habitats** which support seagrass meadows.
- Hence they occur in **wide, shallow, protected areas such as bays, mangrove channels,** the waters of large **inshore islands and inter-reefal waters.**
- The **northern waters of Australia between Shark Bay and Moreton Bay** are believed to be the dugong's contemporary stronghold.
- The **Persian Gulf has the second-largest dugong population,** inhabiting most of the southern coast with a population in the range of 5,800 to 7,300.
- They are usually located at a depth of around 10 m, although in areas where the continental shelf remains shallow dugongs have been known for **descending to as far as 37 metres** where **deepwater seagrasses such as Halophila spinulosa** are found.
- In India, a highly isolated breeding population exists in the **Marine National Park, Gulf of Kutch, the only remaining population in western India.**
- Former populations in this area, centered on the Maldives and the Laccadive Islands, are presumed to be extinct.
- A population exists in the **Palk Strait** between India and Sri Lanka, but it is seriously depleted.
- The population around the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands** is scattered.
- Recoveries of seagrass beds along former ranges of dugongs, such as the **Chilika Lake** have been confirmed in recent years, raising hopes for **re-colorizations** of the

species.

Threats

- The dugong has been hunted for thousands of years for its **meat and oil**.
- **Traditional hunting** still has great cultural significance in several countries, particularly northern Australia and the Pacific Islands.
- Despite being legally protected in many countries, the main causes of population decline include **fishing-related fatalities, loss of seagrass beds due to ocean floor trawling and hunting**.
- With its long lifespan of 70 years or more, it has a **slow rate of reproduction**.
- **Pollution, rampant illegal fishing activities, vessel strikes and unplanned tourism** are the other threats.

Conservation efforts:

- **Dugong protection awareness camps among local fishermen** and others in the seaside villages of Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and the Andamans have been organised.
- The Government of India has been a signatory to the **Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) since 1983** and has signed non-legally binding MoUs with CMS on the conservation and management of Siberian Cranes (1998), Marine Turtles (2007), **Dugongs (2008)** and Raptors (2016).
- A **'Task Force for Conservation of Dugong in India'** was constituted by the Government of India to formulate the conservation action plan for dugongs. It has **recommended the following objectives:**
 1. Improve our understanding of dugong and its habitats through research and monitoring
 2. Conserve the species by reducing direct and indirect causes of dugong mortality
 3. Conserve and manage dugong habitats

4. Develop awareness for its conservation
5. Develop legal protection of dugongs and their habitats
6. Develop national, regional and international cooperation on dugong research and conservation
7. Promote the implementation of the MoU

Mould your thought Where are Dugongs inhabited? What conservation efforts have been made to reduce the threat to Dugongs?