

West Indian Manatees

Protection and conservation



Dauphin Island Sea Lab's Manatee Sighting Network
An adult manatee surfaces to breathe.

MANATEE FACTS

- Manatees belong to the Order Sirenia, which includes manatees and dugongs (a marine mammal similar to the manatee that lives in the South Pacific).
- There are four manatee species alive today. One species that did not survive, the Stellar's Sea Cow, was hunted to extinction in the 18th century.
- The federal government lists West Indian manatees as endangered. There are only about 6,000 alive in U.S. waters.
- Females mature at three years and can reproduce about every three years, with a gestation period of about 12 to 14 months.

Slow-moving, gentle and curious, the West Indian manatee is an endangered species under threat from natural and human sources. Manatees are generally found in Florida. However, there has been an increase in the number of manatee sightings in coastal waters of Alabama and Mississippi, an area previously considered to be the outer limits of manatee habitat. These sightings suggest that the Alabama-Mississippi region is an important seasonal habitat for manatees.

Researchers at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, in collaboration with Sea to Shore Alliance in Florida, are tracking manatees in Alabama waters to determine how manatees use local habitats. The scientists are determining how many manatees visit each year, during which months they visit, where they go and what they eat. Researchers also hope to learn how manatees in Alabama are related to other manatee populations.

Although manatees are protected by the federal government, to date there are no plans to manage and protect these animals outside of Florida. Because there is a limited amount of suitable habitat for manatees, it is essential to understand the animals and their local habitat.

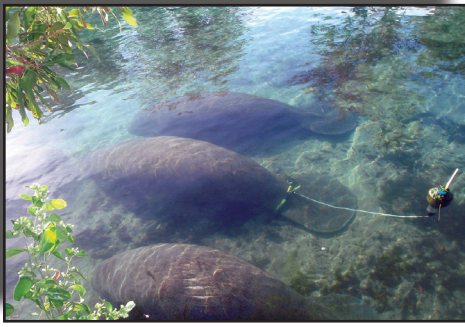
HOW TO MINIMIZE INTERACTIONS WITH MANATEES

- **Please slow: manatees below!** An accidental collision with a boat is a leading cause of manatee mortality. On average, manatees travel at 3-4 mph, making it difficult for them to avoid a fast-moving boat. Being hit by the hull of a boat or its propeller can be fatal for manatees. If you are in manatee habitat, slow down and drive your boat cautiously.
- **Do not discard used fishing hooks or monofilament line.** Becoming entangled in fishing line and consuming hooks can be fatal to manatees.
- **Do not swim with manatees.** Swimming with manatees may increase their interest in human activity and the potential for harmful interactions with humans.



Craig Smith/Mobile Delta

Manatees just under the surface of the water can be difficult to see.



Dauphin Island Sea Lab's Manatee Sighting Network

Researchers use a tag to track a manatee's movements. The tag is attached by a tether around the manatee's tail and floats at the water's surface without impeding movement.

PHYSICAL DETAILS

- Adult manatees are 8 to 14 feet long and can weigh 450 to 2,500 pounds. They can live longer than 60 years.
- Their bodies are cigar-shaped with a paddle-like tail and two flippers, which are used for locomotion and holding food.
- Manatees' closest relatives are elephants.
- The skin of a manatee is very thick and wrinkled and medium gray or brown. It is often covered by algae or encrusted with barnacles. The skin on calves is usually darker than adult skin.
- Manatees have flexible upper lips to pull vegetation into their mouths and molars to grind food. The average adult can eat about 100 pounds of plants per day.

- **Give manatees space.** Do not do anything to alter manatees' natural behavior. Do not entice, chase, feed or touch them. The best rule of thumb is to stay at least 100 feet from manatees. According to federal law, any activity that changes manatees' natural behavior is harassment and is illegal.



Monica Ross/Sea To Shore Alliance

Scars from boat propellers are visible on this adult manatee.

- **Spread the word.** Tell your friends, family, neighbors and colleagues to report manatee sightings to Dauphin Island Sea Lab's Manatee Sighting Network 1-866-493-5803.
- **Report stranded, injured or dead manatees** to Dauphin Island Sea Lab's Manatee Sighting Network at 1-866-493-5803 or to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at (251) 441-5181.
- **Report other marine mammal strandings** (dolphins, whales) to the Southeast Region of the Marine Mammal Stranding Network at 1-877-WHALE-HELP.

ABOUT MANATEES

- The West Indian manatee's scientific name is *Trichechus manatus*.
- Manatees are largely herbivorous and live in shallow tropical to subtropical waters such as bays, estuaries, rivers and lagoons along the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean.
- Manatees consume various aquatic plants, such as turtle grass and water hyacinth, and rarely eat small fish and invertebrates.
- Manatees have very slow metabolisms and move to warm water when water temperature drops below 70°F. Temperatures at or below freezing can kill them.
- Manatees can be found in large groups in the winter in warm-water habitats but are not gregarious by nature.
- Manatees are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act. Their greatest threats are habitat loss and human interactions, such as boat strikes.

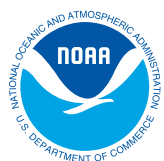


Dauphin Island Sea Lab's Manatee Sighting Network

An adult manatee with her calf.

REFERENCES

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