

Dugong

Fact Sheet



OUR Top DUGONG DETAILS!



1 Dugongs are the only strictly marine mammal to feed on plants.

2 Dugongs are often called “sea cows”. Female dugongs are called cows, males are bulls, and baby dugongs are called calves.

3 The movements of dugongs are very individualistic. Some animals make directed movement of hundreds of kilometres between seagrass meadows in a few days, while others hang out in localised areas.

4 Dugongs can have special cultural and social significance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people along the coast who have hunted them for thousands of years. Traditional Owners have the right to hunt dugongs in their sea country under the *Native Title Act 1993*.



Introducing the dugongs of Gladstone Harbour

With paddle-like flippers, fluked tail and portly body – measuring 3 metres long and sometimes weighing over 500 kilograms – dugongs (*Dugong dugon*) may look like overweight dolphins but are more closely related to elephants.

These herbivorous mammals have a rounded head with a large snout, and nostrils that open when they come to the surface to breathe. Their nostrils close while underwater, where they can remain submerged for up to 12 minutes, although most dives are quite short, lasting for only a few minutes.

Dugongs share 5 characteristics or features with humans and all other mammals, they:

- breathe air
- are warm-blooded
- bear live young
- suckle their young with milk
- have (sparse) hair.

Dugongs have small eyes and their eyesight is believed to be similar to that of a mask-equipped diver. Their hearing seems to be very good, especially in the frequencies of their sounds, which have been likened to bird chirps. Dugongs use the sensitive bristles or whiskers that cover their upper lip to find their food (mostly seagrass) on the sea floor.

Despite their bulky frame, dugongs can be quite nimble and swim rapidly over short distances. They can feed in shallow waters less than one metre deep, but have been recorded feeding at depths of more than 20 metres if there is seagrass to be eaten (but not for long - they have to come up for air!)

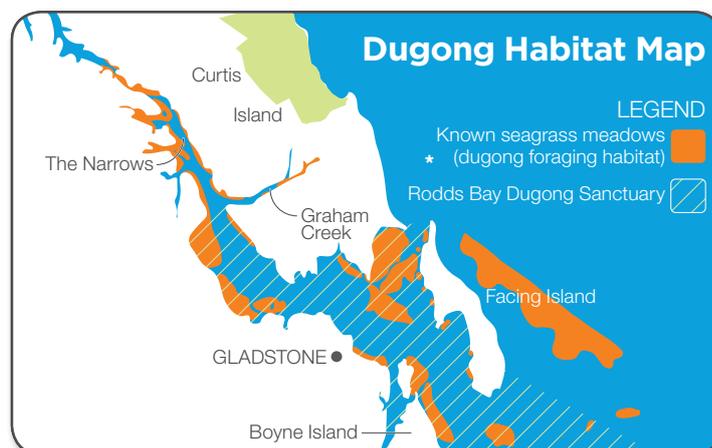
Dugongs have been known to live for up to 70 years but have a very slow breeding rate, meaning the death of just one animal from a small population can have a big impact on the survival of future generations.

Dugongs enjoy warm coastal waters and some dugongs from cooler areas like Moreton Bay may travel to warmer water during winter.

Dining with a dugong

Dugongs *love* seagrass and on average eat about 28 kilograms every day! They will uproot and eat the whole plant if they can, or just nibble on the high-nutrient leaves.

Scientists have discovered that some dugong populations (like those found in Moreton Bay, and in Shark Bay in Western Australia) will also eat invertebrates (animals without a back bone) such as shellfish, sea squirts and polychaete worms.



* Areas in Port Curtis where seagrass meadows have historically been found

Dugong

Fact Sheet



Dugong
© mrHanson / shutterstock.com

The life cycle of a dugong

Most dugongs mate in later winter and spring and give birth between spring and summer when the water is warmest. They are slow to mature with females aged between 7 to 17 years when they have their first calf. Females are pregnant for up to 14 months (around one and a half times longer than humans) and will only give birth to one calf every few years! Calves feed on their mother's milk for at least 18 months, but also start eating seagrass of a very young age. They stay close to their mothers for up to two years (or longer), usually swimming behind them and communicating with their unique sounds.

Gladstone hot spots

A seagrass meadow is the most likely place to spot a dugong in the waters near Gladstone. Dugongs are generally sighted feeding in water that is less than 10 metres deep and protected from winds and waves. They can also be found up creeks and have been tracked upstream for several kilometres!

Rodds Bay to Friend Point is a special Dugong Protection Area that has restrictions on activities that are dangerous to dugongs, like net fishing.

Protected status

In Australia, dugongs are protected under many different laws (legislation).

They are listed as a marine and migratory species under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. They are also protected by other Commonwealth legislation such as the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975*.

The Queensland Government's *Nature Conservation (Wildlife) Regulation 2006* lists dugongs as 'vulnerable to extinction', meaning they likely faces a high risk of extinction in the wild in the longer term if we don't look after them now.

Dugong dangers

- Dugongs rely on seagrass meadows to survive. Seagrass meadows are sensitive ecosystems that need light, and can be damaged or destroyed by human activity (like boat anchors or propellers) and onshore development or natural events (such as coastal floods and cyclones).
- Dugongs are slow moving, live in shallow coastal waters, and are slow to respond to approaching vessels, making them particularly vulnerable to boat strike.
- Dugongs can't hold their breath for long and can drown if caught in fishing lines or shark nets.



Dugong
© mrHanson / shutterstock.com

DO GOOD FOR DUGONGS

What you can do to help

- **Go slow for those below!** Dugongs are slow moving and can't always get out of the way of boats. When boating, look out for dugongs, particularly when motoring through shallow waters and across seagrass meadows, or when navigating narrow channels at low tide.
- Know your depth and draft - if you are leaving a muddy trail behind your boat, you are probably cutting seagrass with your propeller!
- Remember that all drains lead to the ocean and that litter and pollution can degrade or kill seagrass meadows – always put your rubbish in a bin and never pour chemicals down the drain.
- If you come across an injured dugong, call **1300 ANIMAL** to report it, noting the location and any identifying features.

Find out more

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
www.gbrmpa.gov.au

Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage Protection
www.ehp.qld.gov.au

Australian Department of the Environment
www.environment.gov.au



Gladstone Ports Corporation
Growth. Prosperity. Community.

