

West Indian Manatees

Protection and conservation



Lucy Keith, Wildlife Trust

An adult and a juvenile manatee surface to breathe.

PHYSICAL DETAILS

- Adult manatees are massive animals that are 8 to 15 feet long and can weigh between 450 and 1,500 pounds.
- Their bodies are cigar-shaped with two flippers and a paddle-like, round tail. Their flippers are used for locomotion and holding food.
- Manatees' heads are relatively small, and the animals have bristles on their snouts.
- 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.

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 considered to be the outer limits of manatee habitat. These sightings indicate that the Alabama-Mississippi region may be an important spring and summer habitat for them.

Researchers at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, in collaboration with Wildlife Trust in Florida, are attempting to track manatees in Alabama waters to determine how manatees use local habitats. The scientists are tracking 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 in action to manage and protect these animals outside of Florida. Because there is a limited amount of suitable habitat for manatees in Alabama and Mississippi, it is essential to understand human interactions and human impact on 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. Because they are slow-moving animals that inhabit shallow water, it is difficult for them to get out of the way of a fast-moving powerboat. On average, manatees travel 3-4 mph. Colliding with the hull of a boat or getting cut by its propeller can be fatal for a manatee. In manatee habitat, slow your vessel and keep a sharp eye out for the marine mammals. Boat strikes are the leading cause of human-related mortality among manatees.



USGS Sirenia Project

Fresh boat propeller wounds on the peduncle and tail of this manatee could prove to be fatal.



Monica Ross/Wildlife Trust

Researchers use tags to track manatee's movements. The tags are attached by a tether around the manatee's tail and float at the water's surface behind the manatee and do not impede their movement.

MANATEE FACTS

- There are four species alive today. One species, the Stellar's Sea Cow, was hunted to extinction in the 18th century.
- Manatees belong to the Order Sirenia, which includes manatees and dugongs (a marine mammal similar to the manatee that lives in the South Pacific).
- The federal government lists West Indian manatees as endangered. There are only about 3,000 alive in U.S. waters.
- Males are sexually mature at between 2 and 11 years of age, while females mature at 3 years and can reproduce about every 3 years.
- A manatee's gestation period is 12 to 14 months.
- Manatees have flexible upper lips to pull vegetation into their mouths and molars to grind their food.

- **Never feed manatees.** Feeding manatees is against federal law and is harmful. It encourages them to seek human contact instead of feeding themselves.
- **Do not swim with manatees.** Swimming with manatees may increase their interest in human activity, which may increase harmful interactions with humans. 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.
- **Do not discard used fishing hooks or monofilament line.** Manatees may inadvertently consume discarded line and/or tackle, which can be fatal.
- **Spread the word.** Tell your friends, family, neighbors and colleagues to report manatee sightings to Mobile Manatees 1-866-493-5803.
- **Report stranded, injured or dead manatees** to Mobile Manatees at 1-866-493-5803 or to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at (251) 441-5181.
- **Report other marine mammal strandings** (dolphins, seals) to the Southeast Region of the Marine Mammal Stranding Network at 1-866-405-3073.

ABOUT MANATEES

- The West Indian manatee's scientific name is *Trichechus manatus*.
- The West Indian manatee is largely herbivorous that lives in shallow coastal waters, such as bays, estuaries, rivers and lagoons.
- The manatee lives in tropical to subtropical waters along the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico and in the Caribbean.
- The manatee consumes various aquatic plants, such as turtle grass and water hyacinth, and occasionally eats fish or invertebrates, presumably to increase the amount of protein in its diet.
- The manatee has a very slow metabolism and moves to warm water refuges when the water temperature drops below 70°F. Several days of air temperatures at or below freezing can kill them.
- Warm freshwater springs and the warm water outflow from power plants provide essential warm water habitats for manatees during the winter.
- 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.



Monica Ross, Wildlife Trust

An adult manatee rests with her calf.

REFERENCES

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