

Dugong-The Sea Cow in Fisheries Perspectives

*Mr. Lanjile Pradip Tulshiram

PG Scholar, ICAR-Central Institute of Fisheries Education, Mumbai, India

*Corresponding Author's email: pradipofficial2001@gmail.com

Have you ever heard of a "sea cow"? In the Malay and Indonesian languages, it's called a 'duyong.' This incredible animal, the dugong, is the gentle giant that inspired ancient tales of mermaids. But the real magic of the duyong isn't in a mythical song—it's in its peaceful life grazing on underwater seagrass meadows. Imagine a creature so serene that it spends its days slowly drifting over vibrant underwater pastures, using its bristled snout to gently uproot seagrass. This is the true portrait of the dugong, a marine mammal that is far more captivating than the legends suggest. While folklore painted it as a mystical siren, the real duyong is a crucial gardener of the ocean, a devoted mother, and a sadly vulnerable species whose survival is deeply intertwined with the health of our coastal waters. Let's dive in and meet the real animal behind the myth.



From Mermaid Legend to Marine Mammal

So how did this gentle grazer become a mythical mermaid? The legend is a classic case of mistaken identity. Imagine weary sailors of old, gazing out across the sun-dazzled sea. They might spot a female dugong, often seen cradling her calf in her flippers in a remarkably human-like way. When she surfaced, her rounded back and pale skin could, from a distance, create a silhouette of a woman. Add to that the mournful, melodic whistles and chirps dugongs use to communicate, and it's easy to understand how the enchanting "song of the mermaid" was born. Science, however, gives us a clearer, yet equally fascinating, identity. The dugong is a marine mammal, and its closest living relative is the manatee. Together, they belong to the order **Sirenia**, a name taken directly from the "sirens" of Greek mythology, further proof that the link between these creatures and sea nymphs is a global phenomenon.

Meet the Gentle Giant: Anatomy of a Sea Cow

Forget the half-human, half-fish hybrid. The true form of the dugong is a masterpiece of marine adaptation.

- **A Body Built for Buoyancy:** Dugongs have large, cylindrical bodies that can grow over three meters long, covered in thick, pale grey skin that is tough yet sensitive.
- **A Tail for Power:** Unlike the horizontal tail flukes of fish, the dugong's tail is fluked like a whale's, moving up and down to propel its hefty body with slow, powerful grace.
- **A Snout for Grazing:** Its most distinctive feature is its down-turned, fleshy snout. It's perfectly angled for grazing on the seafloor, and its bristly upper lip is split to help it grasp and strip seagrass with ease.

The Sea Cow's Diet: The Ocean's Meticulous Gardener

While the mermaid myth speaks of enchanting songs, the dugong's true impact comes from its quiet work as an underwater gardener. It is the only strictly marine herbivorous mammal in the world, and its entire life revolves around the seagrass meadows it calls home.

A dugong's day is a dedicated routine of grazing. It can spend up to eight hours a day slowly "flying" over the seabed, using its sensitive, bristled snout to root through the sand. It doesn't just nibble on the leaves; it often uproots the entire plant, consuming both the nutritious roots and the shoots. This creates distinctive, meandering furrows on the seafloor—like tractor tracks across an underwater farm. But this isn't mindless consumption; it's a vital form of ecosystem engineering. By cropping the seagrass, dugongs prevent the meadows from becoming overgrown and stagnant. This grazing action:

- **Stimulates New Growth:** Just like mowing a lawn, it encourages the seagrass to grow back thicker and healthier.
- **Increases Biodiversity:** The cleared patches allow sunlight to reach the seabed, benefiting other marine life and creating a mosaic of habitats for fish, crabs, and seahorses.
- **Recycles Nutrients:** Their waste returns valuable nutrients to the ecosystem, fertilizing the very meadows they depend on.

In this way, the dugong is not just a consumer but a master cultivator. Its survival is directly tied to the health of the seagrass, and the health of the entire coastal ecosystem is, in turn, tied to the dugong's gentle gardening.

A Life in the Seagrass Meadows: Habitat, Herds, and Motherly Love

The dugong's existence is intimately tied to the health and abundance of seagrass meadows. These underwater prairies, found in warm, shallow, sheltered coastal waters across the Indo-Pacific, are their sole supermarket, nursery, and home. From the eastern coasts of Africa to the northern waters of Australia, a dugong's world is defined by the gentle sway of seagrass and the sun-dappled shallow seas. Unlike many other marine mammals, dugongs are not deeply social creatures. They are often solitary or found in small, fluid groups, most commonly a mother and her calf, sharing a bond of exceptional strength. Occasionally, larger gatherings of dozens, or even hundreds, can form in areas of exceptionally rich seagrass, but these are temporary feasting assemblies, not permanent social units. The most critical and vulnerable aspect of a dugong's life is its painfully slow rate of reproduction. A female does not reach breeding age until she is at least 10 years old. She then invests an incredible amount of time and care into a single offspring:

- **A Long Wait:** Pregnancy lasts for about **13-15 months**, one of the longest gestation periods of any animal.
- **A Single Calf:** She gives birth to only **one calf** at a time.
- **Years of Care:** The calf will nurse for **18 months or more**, and stay with its mother for up to **two years**, learning vital migration routes and feeding grounds.

This means a female dugong may only raise **one calf every 3 to 7 years**. This "slow-motion" life strategy makes their populations incredibly vulnerable. The loss of even a few adults, especially breeding females, can have a devastating and long-lasting impact on the entire population, making their conservation a race against time.

The Fading Song (Threats): A Gentle Giant in Peril

The mournful call of the dugong, once the inspiration for mythical songs, is growing quieter in our oceans. The very traits that make it so unique—its dependence on coastal seagrass, its slow movements, and its leisurely pace of reproduction—now make it critically vulnerable to a wave of human-driven threats.

1. The Vanishing Pantry: Habitat Loss and Degradation

The seagrass meadows that are the dugong's only food source are under siege. Coastal development, pollution from agricultural and industrial runoff, and sedimentation from deforestation smother and destroy these vital underwater gardens. Without healthy seagrass, dugongs starve, their populations fragment, and they are forced to undertake riskier journeys in search of food.

2. The Unseen Nets: Accidental Bycatch

One of the most immediate and tragic dangers is accidental capture in fishing gear. Dugongs must surface to breathe every few minutes. When they become entangled in gillnets, traps, or fish cages, they drown within moments. This "bycatch" is a leading cause of dugong mortality, often claiming the lives of breeding adults and further crippling the population's chance of recovery.

3. The Busy Highways: Vessel Strikes

As coastal waters become increasingly crowded with fast-moving boats and ships, collisions are a frequent and often fatal occurrence. The slow-swimming dugong, often surfacing unpredictably, is no match for a speeding propeller, leading to catastrophic injuries.

4. History of Hunting

For centuries, dugongs were hunted for their meat, which was likened to veal, and for their oil, hide, and bones. While now illegal in most countries, and culturally significant hunting is often regulated, illegal poaching still occurs, adding further pressure on already diminished populations.

Guardians of the Legend (Conservation): The Fight to Save the Sea Cow

The precarious situation of the dugong has not gone unnoticed. Around the world, a coalition of scientists, conservationists, and local communities is fighting to become guardians of this living legend, implementing crucial strategies to ensure its survival.

1. Safe Havens: Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

A primary focus is the establishment and strict enforcement of Marine Protected Areas. These designated sanctuaries safeguard critical seagrass meadows from destructive activities like bottom trawling and coastal development, providing dugongs with safe spaces to feed, breed, and raise their young.

2. Community as Custodians

Recognizing that the fate of the dugong is tied to the people who share its coastline, many programs now actively involve local communities. By training former fishermen as rangers or eco-tourism guides, these initiatives turn potential hunters into passionate protectors, fostering a sense of shared stewardship for the "dugong" of their ancestors.

3. Science and Technology for Survival

Researchers are using advanced tools to unlock the secrets of the dugong's life. Satellite tags track their mysterious migration routes, aerial drones survey populations, and genetic studies help understand their diversity. This data is vital for creating effective, targeted conservation plans.

4. Mitigating Human Conflict

Efforts are underway to reduce direct conflicts. This includes creating designated boat lanes to minimize vessel strikes, promoting "dugong-friendly" fishing gear that reduces bycatch, and running public awareness campaigns to educate boaters and the public.

These combined efforts represent a beacon of hope. They prove that while the threats are significant, human ingenuity and dedication can forge a path toward coexistence.

India's First Dugong Reserve

India Establishes First Dugong Conservation Reserve in Tamil Nadu

Palk Bay, Tamil Nadu – In a landmark move for marine conservation, India has officially established its first Dugong Conservation Reserve in the coastal waters of Tamil Nadu, offering a new lease on life for the endangered sea mammals locally known as "Kadal Pasi" or "Aalami." The reserve, spanning approximately 500 square kilometers in the Palk Bay region, represents a crucial step toward protecting India's remaining dugong population, estimated to be fewer than 200 individuals. These gentle marine herbivores, often called "sea cows," have faced severe threats from habitat loss, fishing net entanglement, and boat collisions in recent decades.

"This reserve isn't just about protecting a species – it's about preserving an entire ecosystem," said Dr. Priya Sharma, a marine biologist involved in the project. "Dugongs are

ecosystem engineers. Their grazing helps maintain seagrass beds that support countless other marine species, from fish to sea turtles."

The conservation initiative brings together government agencies, local fishing communities, and environmental organizations in an unprecedented collaboration. Traditional fishermen from coastal villages, who have shared these waters with dugongs for generations, are being trained as "guardians of the sea cow."

"We've seen these creatures since we were children," said local fisherman M. Karthik. "They're part of our heritage. Now we have a way to protect them while still sustaining our livelihoods."

The reserve will implement several key measures:

- Designated dugong protection zones with restricted boat speeds
- Modified fishing gear to prevent accidental bycatch
- Seagrass meadow restoration projects
- Community monitoring programs using smartphone technology
- Educational initiatives in coastal schools

Recent satellite tracking studies have revealed surprising insights into dugong behavior, showing migration patterns between Indian and Sri Lankan waters that underscore the need for international cooperation in conservation efforts. "The establishment of this reserve comes at a critical time," noted Conservation Officer R. Srinivasan. "With coastal development increasing and climate change affecting marine environments, this protected area provides a vital sanctuary for these vulnerable creatures."

The initiative has drawn attention from international conservation groups, with the United Nations Environment Programme recognizing it as a model for community-involved marine conservation in South Asia. As dawn breaks over the Palk Bay, conservationists and fishermen alike watch the waters with renewed hope that future generations will continue to witness the serene sight of these marine mammals grazing peacefully in their natural habitat, their survival now more secure than it has been in decades.

Conclusion: More Than a Myth

The story of the dugong is a powerful reminder that truth can be more magical than fiction. The real creature is not a mystical siren but a gentle marine gardener, a devoted mother, and a silent custodian of our coastal seas. Its survival is a barometer for the health of our oceans. Protecting the dugong is about more than saving a single species; it is about preserving a living thread that connects our cultural heritage to our natural world. It is about ensuring that the gentle sea cow continues to grace our seagrass meadows for generations to come. The legend of the mermaid may fade into folklore, but let us ensure the real, breathing wonder of the dugong does not fade with it. The song of the sea cow is a call to action, one we must all answer.