

Big Cypress

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Big Cypress
National Preserve



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Manatees

The Florida manatee is a gentle giant of coastal Florida, lumbering in warm shallow waters during the dry winter months, and reaching vast distances in the Gulf of Mexico during the warmer summer months. Designated as the Florida state marine mammal many people hope to catch a glimpse of one, but their way of life is often veiled in mystery and legend. In seaman's lore, they were often mistaken for mythic mermaids.

The manatee is a large aquatic mammal that is found in saltwater environments around the state. They are described as pudgy grey animals with a rounded nose, flippers, and a paddle-like tail, but they are surprisingly agile as they have been viewed somersaulting and playing in the water. Manatees are covered in an aquatic version of fur known as pelage, a substance thought to help prevent the growth of algae that afflicts the slow moving organisms in salt water environments. They are quite large growing up to 15 feet long. The average size manatee is approximately seven to nine feet in length, and may weigh up to 1,800 lbs! Females tend to be the larger of the species with an average female weighing 1,000 lbs, and males averaging 750 lbs.

There are four species of manatee found throughout the world; the West Indian or Florida manatee, the Amazonian manatee, the West African manatee, and the Chinese dugong. These creatures have intrigued humans for centuries. They have provided many shipwrecked sailors with a food source and became known as a delectable delicacy, which led to the extinction of one of the world's

manatee species, the Stellar sea cow. The Stellar sea cow was the largest type of manatee ever known, and only found off an island in the Northern Pacific Ocean. It was first discovered in the mid 1700s by a shipwrecked sailor and naturalist known as Georg Stellar, but within 27 years of its discovery it had been hunted to extinction.

History

Throughout history the manatee has been viewed in different ways. Sailors in the days gone by would notice these large mammals swimming near the surface of the water. You could imagine that after months at sea without seeing any women many sailors would tend to believe these majestic creatures could be mermaids beckoning to them, sending messages of love and enticement. Manatees belong to the order of Sirenian, which is derived from the ancient Greek myth, *The Odyssey*, in which siren temptresses seduced sailors to shore in order to shipwreck them onto their island. Today many people refer to the manatee as a sea cow because it appears to be a large cow-like sea creature feeding on various types of plants, much like cows grazing in the fields.

Did You Know?

In many cases, boat inflicted injuries occur because manatees cannot hear boats moving towards them—not because manatees are slow moving. The sound frequency emitted by the motor is outside the hearing range of the manatee. Studies have shown that increasing the frequency of sound emitted by boats may help warn the manatees of imposing danger. Future boats may be equipped with a warning system that could decrease the number of manatee accidents.

Feeding

Manatees are herbivores, meaning they eat only vegetation and grasses. They have a highly varied choice of grasses they consume; manatee grass, turtle grass, sea grass, shoal grass, algae, mangrove leaves, and mangrove seeds just to name a few. It is a good thing they like to eat so many vegetables because they need to consume around 10-15 percent of their body weight every single day, which equates to 150-300 pounds of food that a manatee could eat per day. Now that's an appetite! Due to such a massive need to eat, manatees may need to travel vast distances in search of food, which is usually found in more shallow and warmer waters. It can sometimes be difficult to find the amount of food necessary in the cooler winter months and the manatees need to travel inland in search of warmer waters.

Reproduction

Female manatees are typically solitary. While many other mammals pair up and mate with each other for life, the female manatee only meets up with males in order to reproduce. Up to 12 males at a single time may pursue a female for several weeks in the hopes of mating with her. If any of the males succeed, the female will then spend the 12-14 months of gestation alone. Each pregnancy yields one calf, which the mother nurses on milk, just like other mammals. She spends a few years with her calf teaching it how to survive; learning to swim, proper breathing techniques, which grasses to eat, and more. A single female may only reproduce a few times during her lifetime.

Human Interaction

Manatees are just as curious about humans as we are about them. In many documented cases manatees have surfaced near boats in what seems like an attempt to investigate humans. This curiosity has led to many unfortunate interactions between manatees and boats. Fast moving boats and slow moving manatees is a recipe for disaster that affects manatees much more negatively than the boats. Watercraft propellers injure and even kill manatees. These interactions leave the manatees with scars, known as skeg marks. While tragic, the scars aid researchers in identifying individual manatees.

Status

Manatees are considered a threatened species in the United States and as such are afforded protection under penalty of law. The dwindling population of manatees concerns scientists and conservationists around the world. In addition to, and perhaps even more fatal than boat collisions, is cold stress, which is a contributing factor to manatee mortality. A body of water below 68°F is deadly to manatees, and the recent trend of water temperature around the state of Florida has been dropping well below this despite the historical temperatures, which have helped the manatee survive. Manatees search for and utilize any warm waters it can find. The canal system of South Florida and the brackish water areas of the Big Cypress National Preserve serve as sanctuary providing a shallower body of water that retains more warmth throughout the cooler months.

The typical view of a manatee from a South Florida dock. Oftentimes, viewers may only get a glimpse of a manatee's snout or hear a loud snort. The Big Cypress Swamp Welcome Center features a viewing platform from which manatees are frequently sighted.

Photo courtesy of T. Strom/NPS

