

The Gentle Giant

The manatee is a gentle sea mammal. Manatees are sometimes called “sea cows.” Their closest living relatives are elephants and hyraxes. Hyraxes are small, gopher-sized mammals.

Manatees are quite large. They can grow over 13 feet in length. They can weigh up to 3,500 pounds!



Where do manatees live?

Manatees live in both saltwater and freshwater habitats. They live in shallow bays, rivers, canals, and coastal waters.

There are three species of manatee. One manatee species can be found along the east coast of North and South America—from Florida to Brazil. The other two species live in the Amazon River and the west coast and rivers of Africa.



How do manatees move?

Manatees may be big, but they are graceful swimmers. They typically glide along at five miles an hour. They can swim 15 miles an hour in short bursts.

Manatees use their flippers and tail to steer. They move their tails up and down to propel themselves through the water. Their dense, or solid, bones help them stay at or below the water's surface.



A manatee uses its flippers and tail to steer itself through the water.

Do manatees communicate?

Manatees "talk" in chirps, whistles, and squeaks. They use these sounds to communicate fear, anger, and pain.

How do manatees breathe?

Manatees cannot breathe underwater. Since they breathe air through their nostrils, they must come up to the surface every three to five minutes to breathe.

Manatees are born under the water. Right after a calf is born, its mother helps the newborn to the surface. That's where it takes its first breaths. Within an hour after birth, infants usually begin swimming on their own.



A manatee and its calf

Are manatees endangered?

A manatee's natural lifespan is about 60 years. Their only major predators are humans. Our oceans and waterways have grown more crowded. As a result, manatees have lost a lot of the natural habitat that once protected them. Unfortunately, manatees are often hurt by fast-moving boats. They can be caught or injured by fishing nets, too. In some countries, people hunt and capture manatees. These hunters want the manatees' hides, oil, and bones. For these reasons, manatees are nearly an endangered species.

Over time, the number of manatees in the world has lessened. There are only about 4,500 manatees in the world. There are 2,500 manatees in the United States. The United States is working to strengthen laws to protect manatees and their habitats. It is now illegal to hurt, hunt, capture, or kill a manatee. With luck, such laws will continue to help save the gentle giants of the sea.



A sign for boaters in a manatee protection zone