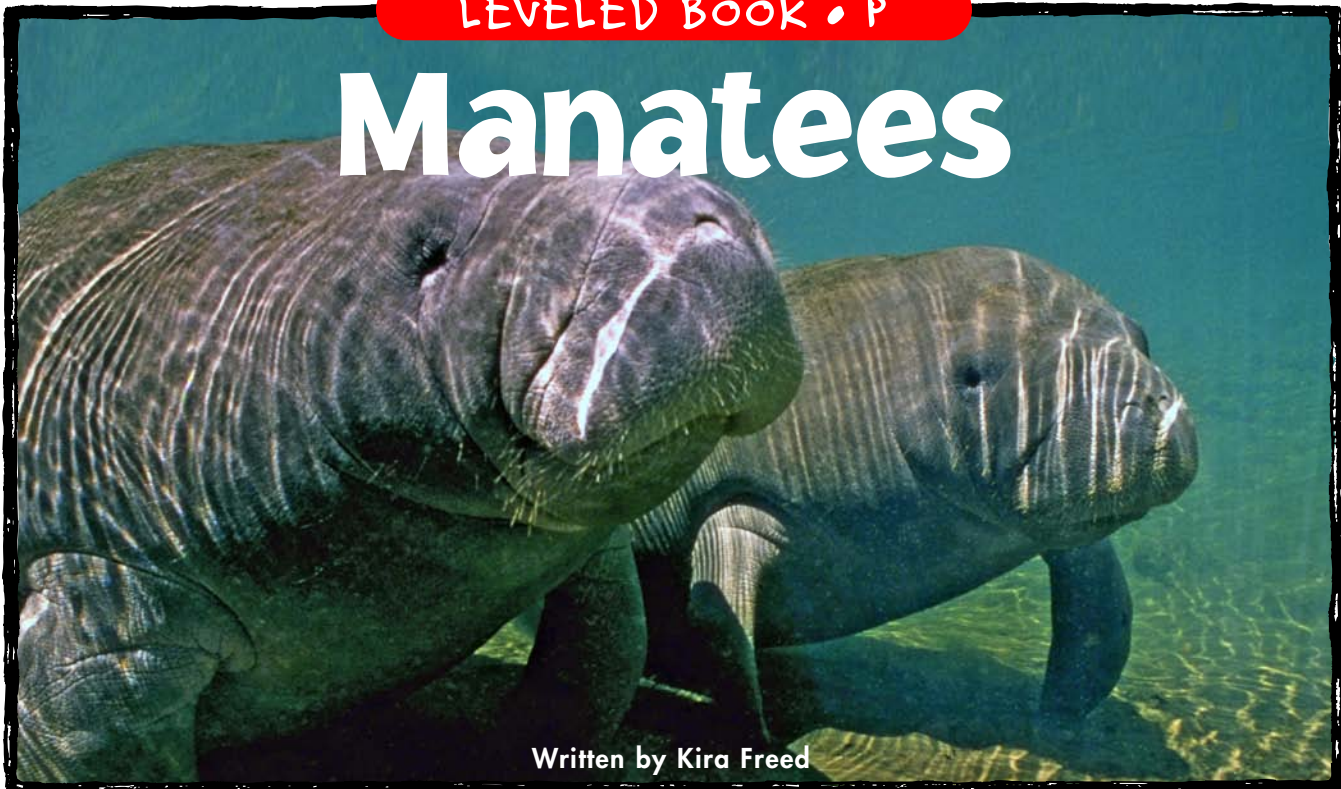


LEVELED BOOK • P

Manatees



Written by Kira Freed

www.readinga-z.com

Manatees

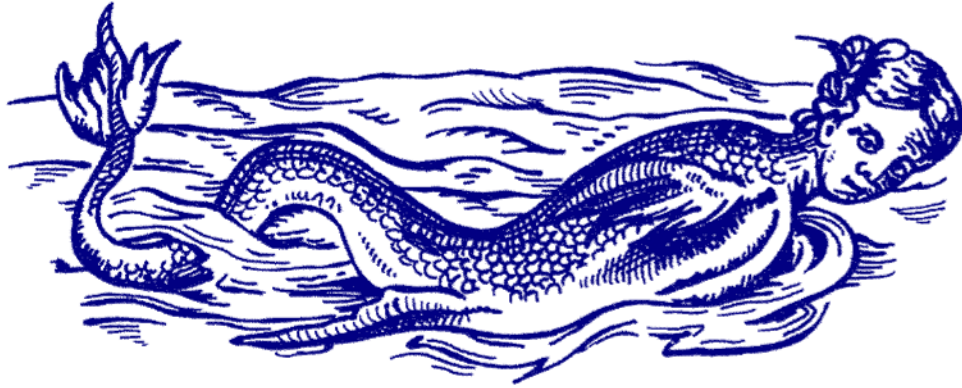


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Introduction

Many years ago, sailors told stories about mermaids, or **sea sirens**. They were beautiful creatures that were half woman and half fish. They sang to sailors to lure them onto dangerous rocks. There, the sailors would get shipwrecked.

When Columbus sailed to the New World, he saw manatees and thought they were mermaids. Nowadays, it is hard to believe anyone could confuse a manatee with a mermaid. Manatees have a gentle, sweet appearance, but they are not nearly as beautiful as mermaids. In fact, they're kind of funny looking.



Close-up of a manatee's face

Description

Manatees are **marine mammals**. They belong to a group of mammals called **Sirenia**. This name comes from the old belief that manatees were sea sirens. They are sometimes called **sea cows** because, like cows, they graze on plants for many hours at a time. And like cows, they eat huge amounts of plant food.



Manatee using a flipper to scratch its face

Manatees are shaped like very chubby dolphins. They have a paddle-shaped tail that helps them move through the water. Large front flippers help them to steer. They have pudgy, wrinkled faces that look a little like the face of a Chinese Shar-pei dog or a walrus. They have heavy, solid bones. Scientists believe their heavy bones keep them from floating too high in the water.



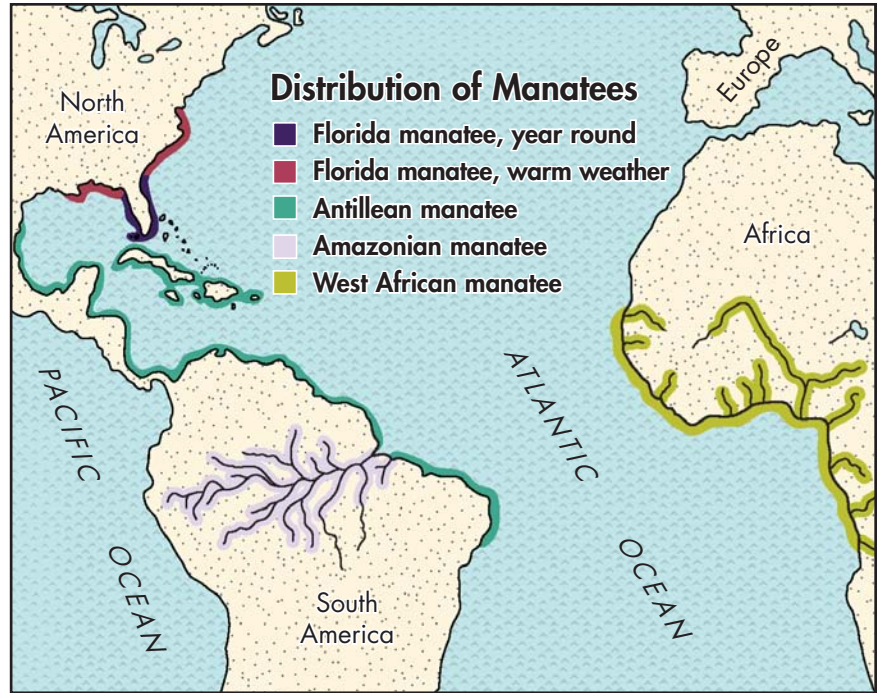
(Top) Manatee surfacing to take a breath;
(left inset) Chinese Shar-pei dog; (right inset) walrus

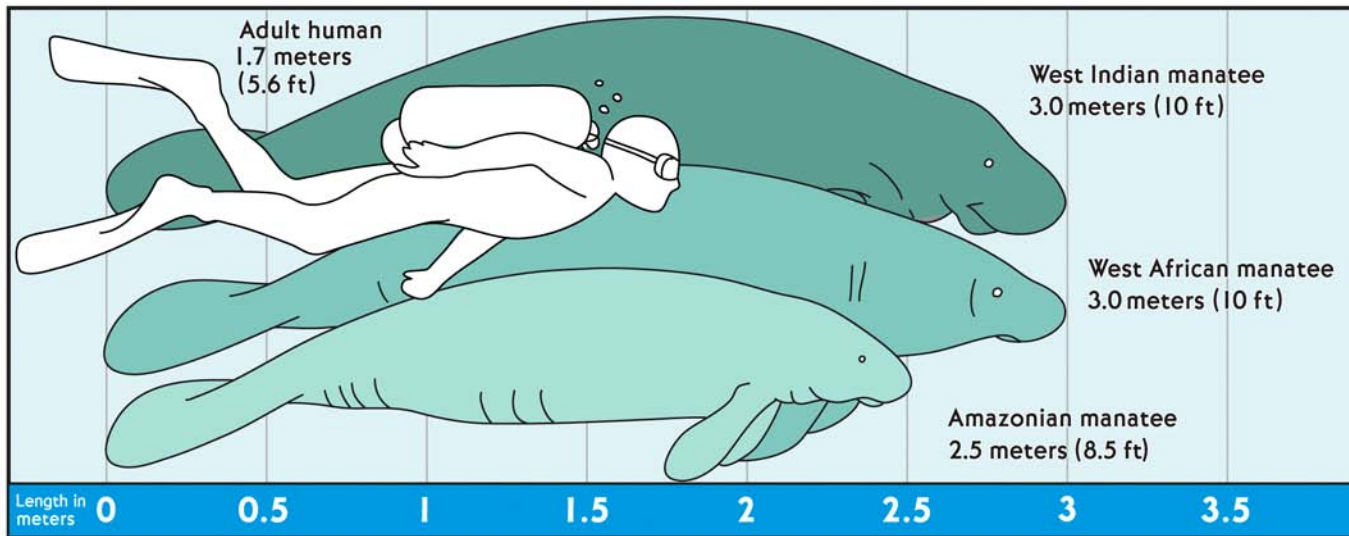


A manatee and its closest living relative, an elephant

Manatees are not close relatives of whales, dolphins, or walruses, even though all of these are marine mammals. They are also not closely related to cows. The closest well-known living relative of the manatee is the elephant.

There are three kinds of manatees—the Amazonian manatee, the West African manatee, and the West Indian manatee. West Indian manatees are divided into two types: Florida manatees and Antillean manatees. This map shows where manatees live today.





West Indian manatees are about 3 meters (10 ft) long and weigh about 545 kg (1,200 lbs). West African manatees are about the same size. Amazonian manatees are smaller. They measure 2.7 meters (9 ft) or less in length. They weigh 455 kg (1,000 lbs) or less.

Habitat and Habits

Manatees live in both fresh water and salt water. They prefer shallow water in bays and rivers and along ocean coasts. They prefer water temperatures higher than 20 degrees C (68 degrees F). A thick layer of **blubber** protects them from the cold, but they still cannot survive if it gets too cold. Manatees are gentle, harmless creatures that have no way to defend themselves. Staying close to shore keeps them safe from sharks and other **predators** in the open ocean.



A manatee uses its flippers to move along the ocean floor.

Manatees **migrate**, or travel, between summer and winter feeding grounds. Scientists have tagged some manatees with radio transmitters to track their movements. They tracked one West Indian manatee that traveled more than 2,414 kilometers (1,500 mi) from Florida to Rhode Island. He broke the record for the longest migration by a West Indian manatee.



A manatee gets tagged with a transmitter so that its migration can be tracked.

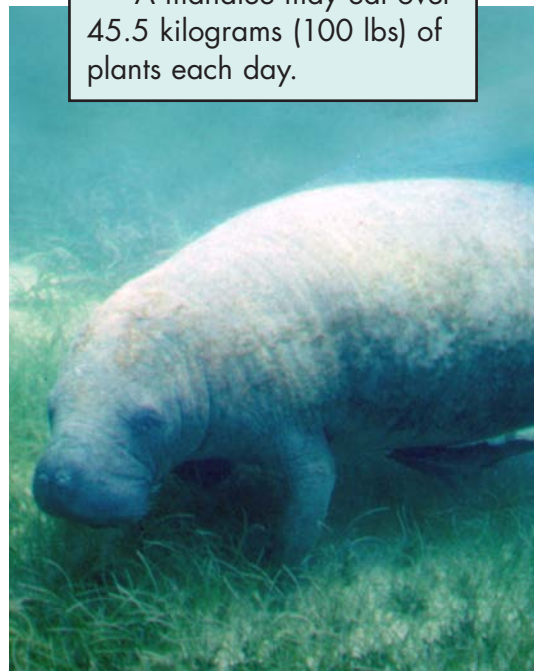


Longest recorded migration route for West Indian Manatee

Manatees spend up to 8 hours a day eating. They are vegetarians that feed on floating or underwater plants. A manatee can eat up to 15 percent of its body weight each day. Imagine if you did that. The average man would have to eat almost 11.5 kilograms (25 lbs) of food a day. Manatees also spend a great deal of time resting—up to 12 hours a day. They may rest on the surface of the water or at the bottom. When resting, they can stay underwater for up to 20 minutes at a time. When they are active, they need to come up for air every 3 to 5 minutes.

Do You Know?

A manatee may eat over 45.5 kilograms (100 lbs) of plants each day.



A manatee feeding on seagrass



Do You Know?

A manatee's body is often covered with a coat of algae. This makes some manatees look like they have green fur!

Manatees sometimes swim upside down.

Manatees mostly live alone and often play alone. They may roll over and over in the water, swim on their backs, or bodysurf. Even though they don't live in herds, the search for warm water sometimes brings them together. Manatees often gather in large numbers near power plants that give off heated water. Dozens of manatees may be found together because the warm water feels good to them.

While manatees are loners, they do sometimes get together. When they do, they get along well with each other. Sometimes manatees seem to kiss each other when they meet. They also nibble and groom each other. They often touch flippers and roll together as though they are dancing. Manatees talk with each other using chirps, squeaks, squeals, and whistles. They may make noise when playing or scared, or to greet other manatees. Noises also help a mother and baby stay in contact with each other.



Two manatees play while others rest.

Like other mammals, manatee mothers give birth to live young. A baby manatee is born between 12 and 13 months after it begins to grow. It is about 1 meter (3 ft) long at birth. It is born underwater and must be brought to the surface right after birth to breathe air. The mother dunks her baby underwater several times to teach it how to go underwater and come back to the surface. A baby manatee begins to eat plants a few weeks after it is born. It may also keep drinking its mother's milk for up to two years.



A female manatee nurses a calf.

Threats to Survival

All manatees are in great danger of becoming **extinct**, or dying out completely. Their numbers are low because of many reasons. One reason is that they have been hunted for food and for their hides. Manatees also can die when they get trapped in fishing nets. In Australia, they sometimes die when they get caught in nets placed along beaches to **protect** swimmers from sharks.



Two manatees feed on floating plants mixed with trash.

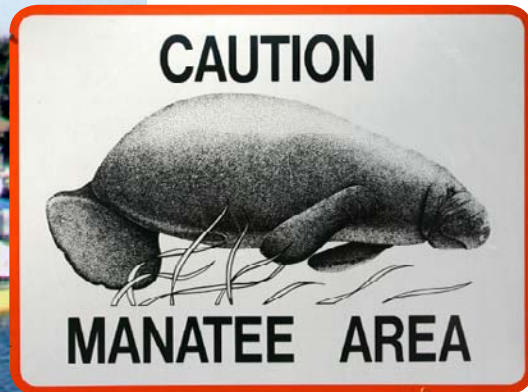
One of the biggest dangers to manatees comes from power boats. Many boaters ignore signs about staying away from areas where manatees live. Manatees move slowly and cannot escape a speeding boat. Boat propellers can injure or kill a manatee. Another threat to manatees comes from pollution of the water they live in. Pesticides and other chemicals dumped in water can be poisonous to manatees.



Two manatees under a boat motor



Boats and divers at Crystal River, Florida



A sign posted to urge boaters to be careful around manatees

Laws have been passed to protect manatees. Areas have been created to protect them. Many groups are working to save the manatee. They are trying to educate people about these gentle creatures and the threats to their survival.

Glossary

blubber (<i>n.</i>)	fat under the skin that keeps marine mammals warm (p. 11)	predators (<i>n.</i>)	animals that hunt and eat other animals to survive (p. 11)
extinct (<i>adj.</i>)	no longer in existence (p. 17)	protect (<i>v.</i>)	to keep something safe from harm (p. 17)
marine mammal (<i>n.</i>)	a mammal that lives in water (p. 6)	sea cows (<i>n.</i>)	another name for manatees (p. 6)
migrate (<i>v.</i>)	to travel, often between summer and winter feeding grounds, or between feeding grounds and mating grounds (p. 12)	sea siren (<i>n.</i>)	a beautiful, make-believe creature that is half woman and half fish; a mermaid (p. 4)
		Sirenia (<i>n.</i>)	the group of mammals that manatees belong to (p. 6)

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