

FLORIDA MANATEE

ALSO KNOWN AS: Sea cow, West Indian manatee, Caribbean manatee

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Trichechus manatus latirostris*



PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ADAPTATIONS:

- Sirenians (manatees and dugongs) are the only herbivorous mammals specially designed to live their entire lives in the water.
- At home in saltwater or fresh water, the Florida manatee needs access to fresh water frequently.
- Its forelimbs are reduced to simple paddles for swimming yet are flexible enough to bring food to its mouth.
- The tail pumps up and down to propel the body.
- Though it is streamlined in shape to reduce water resistance, the manatee is a slow swimmer, averaging a speed of about three to five miles per hour.
- Manatees spend up to a third of their lives eating, and can eat 8 to 15% of their body weight everyday.
- Manatees explore their environment through touch with their highly developed muzzles and muscular lips, which seem to work similarly to an elephant's trunk.
- A constant supply of molars erupts from the back of each jaw and pushes forward, forcing out the old teeth at the front as they wear out.
- Manatees don't have the buoyant blubber that whales and other marine mammals do. Instead they rely on their large lungs for buoyancy. Instead of being located near the heart and within the rib cage, a manatee's lungs are located along its backside. They are long, thin, and wide, and their location contributes to a manatee's ability to float in the water.
- Solid rib bones weigh the manatee down so it can feed on the bottom without using a great deal of energy.
- A manatee comes up for air every couple of minutes, but can stay under water for 20 minutes when resting.
- Manatees require warm water and avoid areas where temperatures drop below 68°F. They migrate to warmer waters during winter, often taking advantage of power plants that give off heat.

Weight	Up to 3,500 lbs
Length	8 to 15 ft

RANGE: Southeastern United States

HABITAT: Coastal wetlands

DIET:

Wild: Aquatic plants

Zoo: Romaine lettuce, carrots, monkey biscuits, sweet potatoes, apples, cabbage, spinach



REPRODUCTION & DEVELOPMENT:

Mating season	Varies depending on food availability
Mating system	Promiscuous (several males and several females)
Length of gestation	13 months
Number of young	1
Weight of young at birth	Up to 70 lbs
Age at weaning	1 to 2 yrs
Reproductive age	Male – 3 or 4 yrs, Female – 5 yrs
Lifespan	50 to 60 yrs in wild

3/2010

Courtship behavior:

During breeding season, a group of adult males, called bulls, will follow a female to form a temporary mating group. The males nuzzle and rub against the female and take turns mating with her.

Raising young:

A single calf stays close to its mother for up to two years, learning what types of foods to eat, where to find the best foraging areas, and migration routes. It nurses from a nipple located under the female's flipper, and begins to sample plants at just a few weeks old. A female only has a calf every two to five years.

SOCIAL BEHAVIOR:

- Manatees are generally solitary, except for mothers with young and temporary mating groups.
- Occasionally, small groups of a dozen or so manatees may gather, especially during winter when they congregate in warmer waters.

INTERESTING FACTS:

- The closest living relative of manatees and dugongs is the elephant.
- Manatees have only six neck vertebrae, whereas most other mammals have seven.
- It is said that ancient sailors mistook manatees for mermaids.

CONSERVATION:**Status in the Wild:****SPECIES@RISK** (IUCN—Endangered)

Conservation Action: Avoiding collisions with speed boats is the manatee's greatest challenge. Speed limits are posted in manatee zones to prevent boats from crashing into manatees. Also, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service coordinates a Manatee Rescue, Rehabilitation, and Release Program.

What is the Cincinnati Zoo doing?

As a partner with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Manatee Rescue, Rehabilitation, and Release Program, the Zoo provides rehabilitation for rescued manatees that require long-term care before they return to the wild. Several of the Zoo's past manatee residents have successfully returned to the wild, including Slip, a manatee that was released just this past spring (2010).

What can people do to help save manatees and their habitat?

- Visitors can support manatee conservation by participating in a community investigation on manatee behavior at the Zoo, using coins as a measure of their results. Direct them to the area just left of the manatee tank to participate.
- Follow posted speed limits when boating in manatee areas.
- Put litter, including fishing line, in its place. Manatees can get entangled in fishing line.

RESOURCES:

Manatee Springs Companion Guide, Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden, 1999

Save the Manatee, www.savethemanatee.org

Manatee Rehabilitation Partnership, www.wildtracks.org

Encyclopedia of Mammals, David Macdonald, 2006