



## The Manatee

### Saving the Real Belizean Mermaids Be Kind Belize Fact-Sheet

#### What are manatees?

Manatees are mammals that live in the water. They breathe air like people do. They are sometimes

known as the 'sea cow'. The manatee found in the waters of Belize is called the West Indian manatee and is the largest of all manatee species. Its scientific name is *Trichechus Manatus* and it is part of order of Sirenia. Sirens (from Sirenia) are another name for mermaids and it is believed that mermaid stories started because sailors thought that manatees were mermaids.

**Where do manatees live?** Manatees can live in fresh and salt water. They like to be where the water is warm. They can be found in the sea along the coast, in lagoons and even in rivers. In the summer, when the water is warm, they can be found as far north as Massachusetts, USA. Usually though, they can be found in warmer climates on the southern coast of the USA down to the northern part of South America.

**What is life like for a manatee?** Manatees can live 50-60 years. They can't start having babies until they are 5 years old. They carry their babies for over one year and up to 14 months. They normally have only 1 baby, known as a calf but sometimes they have twins. Because they are mammals, their calves live by drinking milk that their mother produces until they are about 2 years old.



**What do manatees look like?** Manatees have greyish brown skin and are very large. Sometimes their skin can look greenish because algae grows on them. They can grow to over 1300 pounds and up to 10-12 feet in length. They have a wrinkled face with whiskers on their nose and a round, fat looking body that ends with a tail that looks like a paddle. They have two small fins at the front of their body that have three or four small nails on them.

**What do manatees eat?** Manatees are herbivores, which means that they only eat plants. Because manatees are so big and because they use so much energy, they have to eat up 150 pounds of plants a day. The reason they use so much energy is because they breathe air and cannot stay under water for very long. They have to come up to the surface every 5 minutes or so to breathe. That takes a lot of energy when you weigh over 1000 pounds.

Manatees like to eat sea grass and other plants found in the water. Sometimes they do eat small fish with the plants, but no one knows if they do this on purpose or not, so they are considered vegetarians.

*This fact-sheet was created in honour of the amazing work of Wildtracks. Special thanks to Justin Taus (author of 'Twiggy the Manatee') for helping with manatee facts and to Tony Rath (photographer extraordinaire) for allowing the use of his photographs.*

## Interesting Facts About Manatees

**How do manatees communicate?** Manatees communicate with 'squeaks', 'chirps' and grunts. No one is really sure what they are saying yet as we don't know enough about manatees, but what we do know is that they use different sounds in different situations. For example, when they are frightened by fast boats they make sounds like 'screams'. Mothers and their calves are also able to use sounds to find each other.

**Are manatees important?** Like all living creatures, manatees are a very important part of the system that keeps our planet alive. They help to keep the grasses and plants in the water under control and healthy. When they eat and digest the plants, they make fertiliser that helps more plants to grow. Without their help, many other creatures that live in the water would have no place to live and nothing to eat.

Right now manatees are endangered, which means that there is a chance they could all die in the wild. This would be very bad for our rivers and our coast, so we must do everything we can to save them.

Manatees also have the added bonus of being cute and harmless, so tourists love to come to Belize to see them. If we had no manatees, we would have fewer tourists and fewer jobs for Belizeans.

**Why are manatees endangered?** Manatees have been hunted for food and for their skins until there were not many left. Those that are left are often hit by boats that are speeding or not looking out where they are going. Manatees are protected and it is against the law to hunt or kill them, but now it is important that boat captains take special care to help protect the manatee in Belize by traveling slowly in areas where manatees live. We also need to protect the areas where they live from pollution and development.

Manatees can live in salt and fresh water but they still need to drink fresh water.

Manatees look fat but most of their size is taken up by their stomach and intestines, which they use to digest all of the plants they eat.

The closest living relatives to manatees are elephants and like elephants they are constantly losing and replacing their teeth throughout their lives. Manatees can also use their nose like an elephant does to move things.

Humans and almost all other mammals have 7 vertebrae (bones) in their neck. Only sloths and manatees are different. Manatees only have 6 vertebrae in their necks.



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