



World Dugong Day

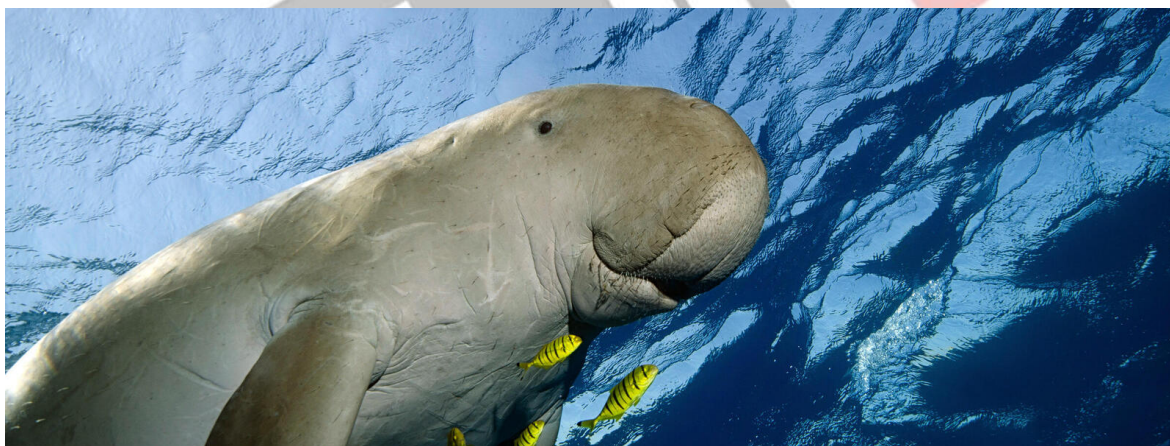
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Why in News?

As the world observed [World Dugong Day](#) on 28th May, attention turned toward India's dwindling **dugong population**. With only around 200 individuals remaining in the wild, making their conservation a pressing national priority.

What are Dugongs?

- **About: Dugongs (*Dugong dugon*)**, also called “sea cows,” are marine mammals that graze on seagrass beds, earning them the nickname “farmers of the sea.” They are the **only herbivorous marine mammals found in Indian waters**.
- **Distribution:** Dugongs are distributed throughout the **Indo-Pacific region**, and along the Indian coastline, they primarily inhabit the warm waters around the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands**, the [Gulf of Mannar](#), [Palk Bay](#), and the [Gulf of Kutch](#).
 - The Palk Bay is considered their last stronghold in Indian waters.



- **Behaviour:** The dugong is a **long-lived species**, capable of living up to 70 years. Typically **solitary or found in small mother-calf pairs**, large herds common in Australian waters are rare in India.
 - Dugongs reach reproductive maturity at **nine to ten years** and give birth every three to five years.
 - This **slow reproductive cycle**, combined with extended maturity and infrequent calving, limits the population's maximum **growth rate to about 5% per year**.
 - They are closely related to **manatees** but are strictly marine and shy in nature.
 - Manatees are large, herbivorous aquatic mammals of the **Sirenia group**, found in coastal regions of South America, West Africa, and the Caribbean.
- **Diet:** Dugongs feed on seagrass species such as ***Cymodocea*, *Halophila*, *Thalassia*, and *Halodule***, consuming 20-30 kg per day. Their feeding stirs up the seabed, helping maintain

seagrass health and biodiversity.

- **Protection:** The Dugong is listed as Vulnerable on the **IUCN Red List of Threatened Species**.
 - **Appendix I** of [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species \(CITES\)](#) bans international trade of dugongs or their parts, ensuring strict protection.
 - In India, Dugongs are protected under **Schedule 1 of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972**.
 - India is a signatory to the [Convention on Migratory Species \(CMS\)](#) since 1983 and to the **CMS Dugong Memorandum of Understanding since 2008**.
 - A national Task Force has been set up to **address dugong conservation and CMS implementation**.
 - The [Dugong Conservation Reserve](#), established in 2022 in Palk Bay, Tamil Nadu, protects about 122 sq km of seagrass along the coasts of Thanjavur and Pudukottai districts.
- **Threats:** Habitat loss is a major concern, as **seagrass meadows** are being destroyed by **port construction, dredging, land reclamation, and pollution** from agricultural runoff, sewage, and industrial waste.
 - **Mechanised fishing** has degraded dugong habitats and increased accidental entanglement in nets, often causing fatal drownings.
 - **Climate change has added another layer of vulnerability**, with rising sea temperatures, [ocean acidification](#), and extreme weather events affecting both food availability and breeding grounds.
 - **Illegal hunting** also persists, especially in remote regions like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
 - Additionally, their **slow reproductive cycle (maturing at 9-10 years and reproducing only once every 3-5 years)** severely limits their ability to recover.
- **Dugong Conservation:** Protecting and restoring seagrass habitats is vital for dugong conservation. This involves **mapping and monitoring seagrass meadows, restricting damaging activities**, and promoting community-led stewardship, especially with local fishers.
 - Regulating harmful fishing methods like **gill nets and trawling in dugong areas reduces accidental harm**.
 - More research funding is needed for long-term dugong studies, supported by citizen science and traditional knowledge. Technologies like tagging and drones aid in tracking and habitat identification.

Seagrass

- Seagrass is an **underwater flowering plant**, not to be confused with seaweed (macroalgae). Classified as **wetland ecosystems**, seagrass meadows stabilize the seafloor, support fisheries, capture carbon, and shelter marine life.
 - **Healthy seagrass is essential for dugongs and marine life** such as turtles and fish.
 - A 2022 study by the National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management documented 516.59 sq. km of seagrass habitat in India. This translates to a **carbon dioxide sequestration potential of up to 434.9 tonnes per sq. km each year**.
- India's most extensive seagrass meadows occur along the **Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay, off the coast of Tamil Nadu**, and together support more than 13 species of seagrass (the highest diversity in the Indian Ocean).
 - Seagrass in **Lakshadweep and Kachchh is patchy and threatened by port activities and pollution**. Andhra Pradesh and Odisha have minor, limited seagrass habitats unsuitable for dugongs.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims

Q. With reference to 'dugong', a mammal found in India, which of the following statements

is/are correct? (2015)

1. It is a herbivorous marine animal.
2. It is found along the entire coast of India.
3. It is given legal protection under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act; 1972.

Select the correct answer using the code given below.

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: C

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