

Student

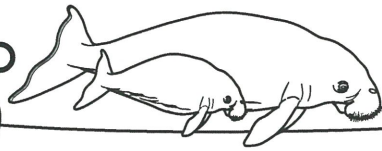
Fact Files



Australian Government

Great Barrier Reef
Marine Park Authority

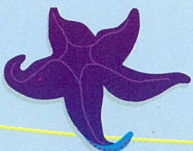
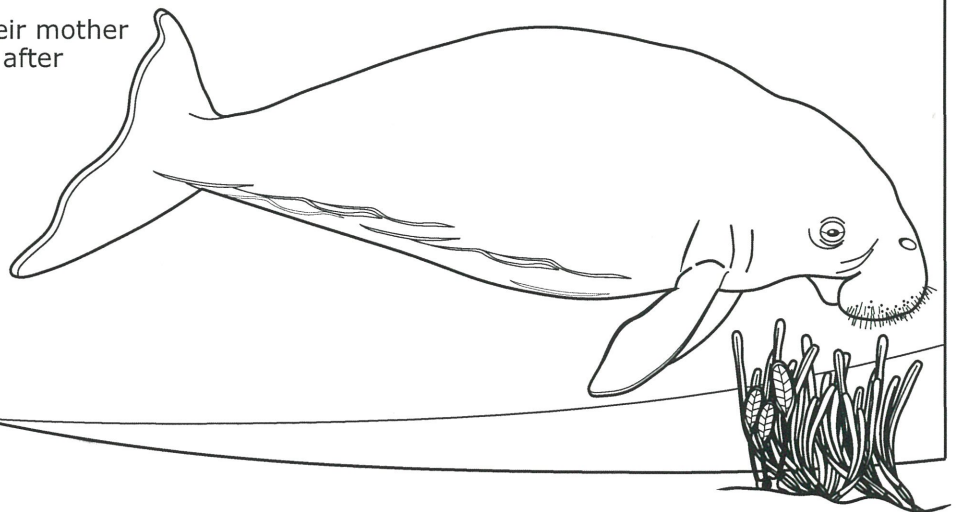
#15



January 2007

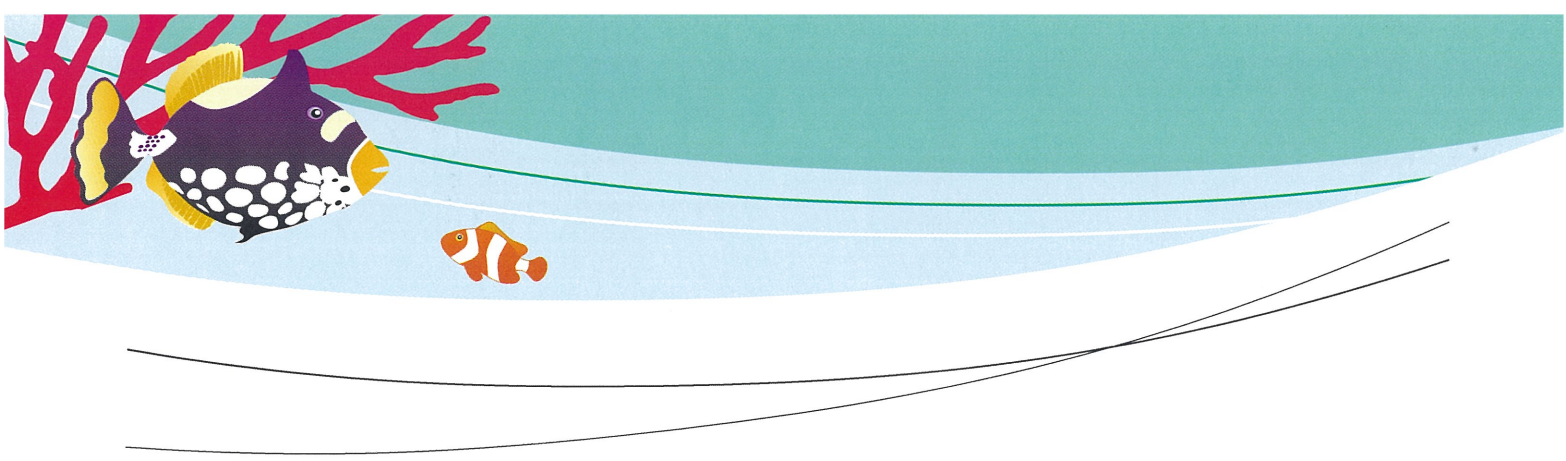
Dugongs

- Dugongs are the world's only fully vegetarian marine mammal.
- Research indicates that there are approximately 14 000 dugongs in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.
- Dugongs can live for at least 70 years.
- Dugongs can grow up to three metres long and weigh up to 400 kilograms!
- Dugongs only have one calf at a time.
- Calves remain with their mother for around 18 months after birth.
- Dugongs closest land relative is the elephant.
- For thousands of years, dugongs have played an important part in the traditions and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living along the Queensland coast.
- Dugongs are a protected species in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.



our great barrier reef
let's keep it great





Dugongs, like whales and dolphins, are mammals, they require air to breathe and spend their lives at sea. Researches believe there are about 90 000 dugongs in Australian waters: approximately 14 000 of them are in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

Appearance

Dugongs have a large streamlined body, with flippers and a tail and can grow up to three metres long and weigh up to 400 kilograms. Their skin is thick and smooth. Their nostrils are located near the front of their head enabling them to breathe with most of their body beneath the surface. Unlike other mammals, dugongs cannot hold their breath under water for very long. Their mouths are large, and the upper lip is covered in bristles which are used to find and grasp seagrass. Dugongs move slowly and gracefully in the water.

Breeding

Female dugongs first breed between the ages of six and 17 years old. They can produce calves every two and a half to five years if their food supply is of good quality. The female will produce a single calf after a 14-month pregnancy. Most calves are born between September and October, and remain with their mother for around the first 18 months.

Feeding

Dugongs along the Great Barrier Reef feed mostly on small, delicate seagrasses, which are low in fibre, high in nitrogen and easily digestible. A dugong can dig up an entire seagrass plant, including the roots. Dugongs rely on an extremely long intestine and bacteria living within it to breakdown parts of the seagrass that are difficult to digest.



Threats to survival

Dugongs are protected in the Great Barrier Reef, however human activities cause a number of threats. Coastal development and agriculture in the Great Barrier Reef catchments can lead to poor water quality which can destroy seagrass beds, an important habitat and food source for dugongs. Dugongs can also become tangled in nets and drown, be struck by speeding boats when they surface to breathe and can be harmed or even killed if they swallow litter such as discarded fishing line.

Cultural significance

Dugongs are an important element of the culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living along the Great Barrier Reef. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a very good knowledge of dugongs, their habits and their environments. The activities associated with hunting dugongs and preparing the meat has great significance and is a long cultural tradition. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are keen to be involved in the management of dugong and the protection of dugong habitat in the Marine Park.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is working with Traditional Owners to assist them with managing their hunting sustainably via Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreements.

You can help protect our dugongs

- Don't litter: even if you throw a piece of rubbish on the ground in your school, it can make its way into the ocean.
- Keep drains and gutters clear and free of rubbish and chemicals.
- Encourage your teachers and parents to use garden beds or vegetation strips around your home and school to capture rainwater.

