



INTERNATIONAL CLIPPING SERVICE

Lakshmi Bldg., Sir P.M. Road
Fort, Bombay-400 001

The Indian Post-Bombay

22 JAN 1989



ENDANGERED SPECIES

by RAJU KANE

Writing in a 1928 issue of the journal of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), the famous naturalist SH Prater recounts an amusing story: "Captain John Kahu of the cargo steamer SS Samshon saw in the Red Sea, in the July of 1905, what he took to be three human beings standing waist deep in water. Mistaking them for the survivors of a wreck, he signalled to them and steered his ship in their direction. To his surprise, they appeared to elude his efforts at rescue and presently diving under water disappeared from sight."

What Captain John Kahu had seen was the Dugong or the Sea-Cow. The word Dugong is derived from the Malaysian name to the animal—Duyong. The Dugong's habit of half-rising out of water, coupled with its vague resemblance to humans has given rise to countless legends of a half-human half-fish abounding in the sea off Ceylon.

Megasthenes recorded the existence of a creature in the ocean off Ceylon with some

features of a woman, while the Portuguese and Spainards gave the Dugong a name signifying Woman-Fish. According to Prater, Aelian's description of fishes with heads of lions, panthers and rams inhabiting the coast of Ceylon may have been sparked off by the Dugong. The Dutch call the Dugong a 'Little Bearded Man'.

Dugongs are found along the Red Sea coasts, the east coast of Africa, Madagascar, Mauritius and northern shores of Australia. In India the Dugong is found in the Gulf of Mannar and the Andaman Islands. In fact, a creek in Great Nicobar is called the Dugong creek. Though reports in the early part of the century have also placed the Dugong off the Malabar and Konkan coasts, no recent sighting on the west coast of the country have been made.

Relative of the now-extinct Giant Sea Cow—which was wiped out just 40 years after its discovery in 1742—the Dugong is a large marine mammal on an average three metres long and weighing about 125 Kg. Its closest surviving relative is the Mantee which inhabits the west coast and tropical rivers of Africa and the Atlantic Seaboard of tropical America. While the male Dugong has a pair of tusks growing out of its upper jaw, the female the growth of the tusks is arrested before they cut gums. The animal has two small flippers but no hind

limbs. Its powerful tail operates as its organ of propulsion, though like the whales it moves vertically downwards instead of the sideways movement of the fish. Dull Brownish grey in colour, fading to pure grey on the sides, the whole trunk, limbs and tail of the animal is covered with fine hair which give it a prickly appearance.

The most remarkable feature about the head is the enormous extension of the upper lip in form of a broad, flattened horse-shoe shaped disc which overlaps the side of the mouth. A smooth flabby tongue-shaped pad conceals the mouth and projects well over the lower jaw.

A pair of crescent shaped nostrils are placed over the pendulous muzzle and two minute openings on the upper surface of the head serve the purpose of ears.

The Dugong is completely herbivorous in nature and feeds on a particular species of marine grass and algae. While browsing the Dugong roots up its food with sidelong twists of its head, coming to surface to breathe at short intervals.

Despite being recorded from ancient times, not much is known about the feeding habits, parasitology, pathology and reproductive cycle of the animal. While naturalists agree that a Dugong produces only one calf at a time, they differ on such details like the mating rituals,

mating seasons, and calving time.

All of them, however, agree to the fact that a female Dugong is extremely attached to her young and displays a remarkable tendency to remain by its side even in moments of great danger.

Thanks to man's compulsive urge to destroy everything created by nature, these moments of danger are being faced by more and more Dugongs. In 1928 Prater had

on the Gulf of Mannar coast who consider Dugong meat to be a great delicacy. The flesh is today priced at about Rs 40 per kg. Since one Dugong carcass yields an enormous amount of flesh, it is not a surprise that more and more Dugongs are being killed.

Despite being accorded protection under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, an estimated 250 Dugongs are being killed every year. The gravity of the situation is even more

an easy victim to this method of killing. To avoid any problems from law enforcement agencies, the meat is landed in a cut-up state, making it almost impossible to distinguish it as Dugong meat.

Another problem is the destruction of sea grass, on which the Dugong feeds, by siltation and marine pollution.

To save the Dugong from meeting the same fate as the Giant Sea Cow, Dr EG Silas and Bastian Fernando of the

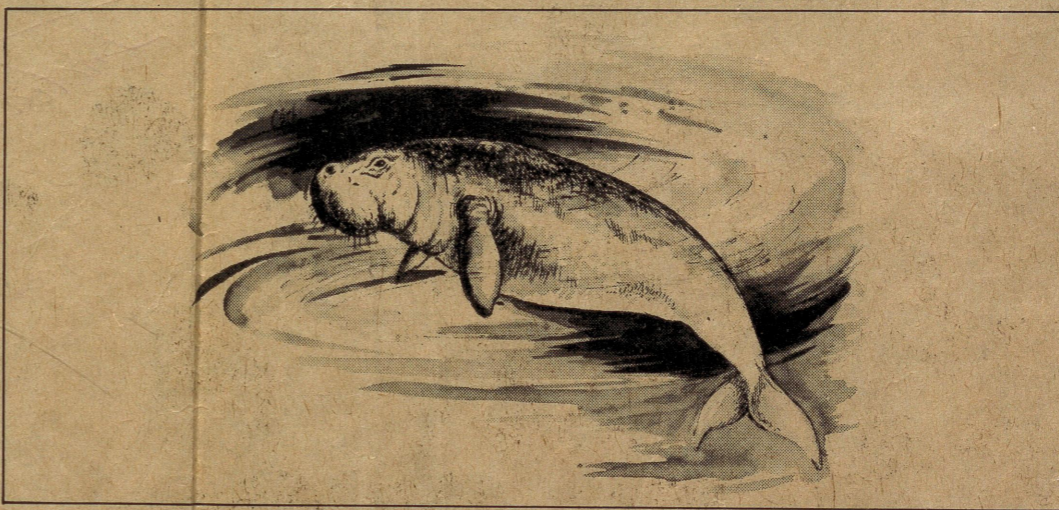
ments, study of the extent and ecology of the sea grass and measures to conserve it, a total stop of fishing with dynamite and efforts at captive breeding of Dugongs.

Dr Helene Marsh of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), who was in India last year to study the Dugong problem has in a letter to the Chief Wildlife Warden recommended recruitment of informers among the villagers to give information about a Dugong kill, appointment of wildlife officers with powers of prosecution, provision of mechanised boats of these officers to check the killing, institution of check points at the villagers known to indulge in Dugong hunting and an intensive public awareness campaign.

JC Daniel, curator BNHS and SA Hussain also from BNHS who had accompanied Dr Marsh during her study pointed out that most of the recommendations could not be implemented due to one constraint or another.

An aerial survey, given the geo-political situation in the region, was out of question, so was radio tagging due to the enormous costs involved. Captive breeding of Dugongs would be extremely difficult as the animal had never survived for long in captivity, they said. "The basic problem is that no one is bothered. To most people Dugong is just a strange word," Mr Daniel said.

Mermaid of the Indian ocean



warned that reckless hunting for flesh and hide had threatened the Dugong. Today the situation is far more serious. Dugong fat is believed by some fisherfolk to be effective in curing dysentery. Some others use the power of Dugong bones as a cure against ulcers.

The greatest threat, however, comes from the fishermen

due to the fact that Dugongs have a relatively low reproductive rate.

The most disturbing aspect of modern day Dugong hunting is the use of sophisticated methods like dynamite. Lighted dynamite sticks are thrown at the animal when it surfaces for a breath. Since a Dugong is a slow, sluggish animal, it is

Central Marine Fisheries Institute of Mandapam had presented an action plan at an international symposium held in Cochin in 1984.

The plan suggested an aerial survey in Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar and a census of the Dugong population in the area, radio tagging of Dugongs to study their move-