

Will the manatee face the same destiny as the Steller's seacow?

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Mammalia

Order: Sirenia

Family: Trichechidae

Genus: Trichechus

The manatees, also known as dugongs or sea cows are large, shy marine herbivores. Their name manati means breast in the language of Taino which are the original people of the caribbean. The reason for this name is that when a manatee comes up for air it resembles a woman's breast and hunters thought they were mermaids (though it is possible that the hunters had just been at sea for too long and simply missed a woman's touch). They can reach up to 4 meters and weigh as much as 1000 kg but they're are completely harmless and lurk around in shallow waters feeding on seagrass. In fact they are the only marine mammals that are strictly herbivores. Manatees are found in the Caribbean Sea, Gulf of Mexico, Amazon Basin and West Africa. The West Indian Manatee, the one that migrates into the Florida rivers, is the one most studied as it is hard to study the manatees of the other regions, especially the West African one but little is known of them and they're rarely seen.

The manatees are now facing a critical situation since their being is threatened by boats, climate changes and loss of habitat as well as they give birth to single calf every three to seven years. They are thought to be around 1000-3000 around Florida but no exact number is known and in the other areas there is no certain number to be known. For this reason the manatees have been listed vulnerable or on the verge of extinction and are preserved were they habitat although they are hunted by people in Ghana as well as tribe members of Aborigines in Australia. Organizations around the world try to do anything to save the few manatees left from the same destiny as the Steller's sea sea cow faced 240 years ago.

Back in 1741 the giant Steller's sea cow was discovered near the Commander Island. In 1768, only 27 years later the Steller's sea cow was extinct. The reason was neither climate change nor removal of food sources by sea otters, but humans. Before the island became a regular stop for Russian fur hunters the Steller's sea cows were about 2000 (according to Leonhard Stjnegger). Since the sea cow was a great source of nourishment for the fur hunters, they would hunt as many as possible for direct consumption and to bring along the long journey. Up to 250 sea cows could be hunted per year and much of the meat would go to waste, this overexploitation is believed to be the reason for the Steller's sea cow extinction. Also the fact that the sea cow only breeds every three to seven years they didn't have a chance to overcome this overfishing.

Today the same thing is happening to the manatees except this time it's not in the form of hunting. Their biggest threat is being struck by boats or slashed by propellers since they keep in shallow waters. In some cases the manatee does survive those collisions but with major tail mutilation or multiple disfiguring dorsal laceration. Even though they can live with those injuries this is thought to impact population growth by reducing calf survival or calf production in wounded females.

Another thing that is threatening the manatees living is their source of food. Even though they don't have much competition over food, the seagrass they feed on is considered to be degrading due to climate change, pollution as well as other factors. Pollution (by humans) does not only affect the manatees food source but may also affect them according to study made by Björn Munro Jenssen. Along with other marine mammals, manmade chemicals are taking their toll on the life of these mammals. Those chemicals can cause endocrine disruption, especially the thyroid system and neurodevelopment. The effects are different in different species but may cause increased concentration of progesteron (polar bears), asymmetry in wings (glaucous gull) etc. The effects on manatees is not known but without a doubt effects them in some way. Along with climate change those chemicals can have dramatic consequences since it has shown that animals exposed to these chemicals have harder time adjusting to different lifestyle then the ones not exposed. Eventhough the manatees prefer warm water, the climate change may interfere with the survival of calfs and reproduction rate though this has yet to be studied properly. But the climate change does affect their source of food as stated above.

Conclusion

Ironically manatees biggest threat is by the ones who are also trying to save them; us, humans. Around the world there are groups of people that have devoted themselves to try and save the manatees but unfortunately it hasn't showed much progress. In Florida there are many laws to protect the manatees and anyone who harms them or kill will face a fine or even an imprisonment. Despite those laws, manatees death are increasing at a rather alarming rate and boaters seem to ignore the sanctuary and refuges of the manatees. After reading about the manatees it is hard to imagine what would be the best way to ensure their being, since there will always be people that simply don't care and to be able to succeed in a mission as this one everybody has to participate. Banning fishing and boating in areas were manatees habitat would seem like the only right thing to do but it's also an impossible request. If the situation remains as it is today the manatees will disappear from the wild and will only be found in marine zoological park, fed and kept by humans. So it seems that there is a rather big possibility that the manatees could face the same destiny as the Steller's sea cow and those slow moving, peaceful animals could disappear from the wild, for good.

Sources

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