

Manatees

Years ago when I lived in Florida I had the chance to swim with manatees. I was very scared at first, but when my dad pulled me in the water and I felt one on my feet, I was even more scared. After about five minutes I had touched at least seven manatees. I was amazed! The gentle creatures would never hurt anyone. They have earned their nickname – gentle giants.

Appearance and Characteristics

Manatees are large sea mammals. The skin of a manatee is mostly hairless, but surprisingly, the whiskers on its snout are very sensitive. A manatee's skin is smooth and wrinkled. They have a huge blimp-shaped body with two short, plumpy flippers. Their tail is flat and shaped like a paddle. They have small, black, round eyes that are widely spaced. They have a broad snout. Their brain is the size of a softball. Manatees have lips that work together to grasp and pull food into their mouths a lot like an elephant's trunk. Manatees look like miniature submarines. An average manatee is ten feet long and weighs 1,000 pounds. They can grow to be thirteen feet, 3,500 pounds, and surprisingly, female manatees are bigger than males.

Life Cycle and Biology

Female manatees can give birth every three to five years. They usually give birth in the spring or summer. They usually only have one calf, but they can have twins. A manatee can be born with their head or tail first. When it is born, the mom nudges the baby to the surface to take its first breath. The mom then pushes the baby underwater many times to show it how to go under the water. Manatees have a thin layer of fat on their skin called blubber that helps keep them warmer. A manatee's blubber also helps it float. A baby manatee weighs around 60 pounds and is about four feet long. A manatee's mom stays close to her calf. They communicate in squeaks and whistles. Moms teach their calves skills until they grow up.

Habitat and Diet

Although nomadic wanderers, manatees mostly live in Florida. They do not have a permanent home, and they don't protect any specific areas. They live in shallow, warm, water along the shore. Manatees migrate in the winter down to Florida, and in the summer, they go north along the coastline. Manatees can travel hundreds of miles. Scientists think that they go back to the exact same spot in Florida each year. Manatees cannot live in water under 68 degrees. Manatees do not have a wide variety of food they eat. They mostly eat seaweed, grass, and sea plants. Even though they do not eat a big variety of things, they do eat a lot. A manatee can eat up to 10-15% of their body weight. That means they can eat 100-150 pounds of food every day. Often called sea cows, they have the same variety of food as a cow. They are herbivores.

Enemies and Threats

The only real threat to manatees is people, and it is hard to find a way to protect them since most of their injuries are accidental. "From 1950 to 1970 the population in Florida has almost doubled" (Lourie 10). Because the human population has increased so drastically, so have the number of motorboats. Boats often speed through manatee zones which can kill or makes deep gauges in their skin if manatees are struck by the motor. Hundreds of manatees get killed or hurt every year. Sadly, scientists identify manatees from the gauges in their skin. People are their only threat. Boats are not the only things people use to hurt manatees though. The gentle creatures can get caught in fishing nets or eat fish hooks. Manatees have to be sent to special marine centers to heal. People are searching for new safe habitats for manatees. There are only three species of manatees, and sadly, they are all endangered.

Conclusion

Manatees are fascinating. Huge, but gentle and intimidating, but tame, they are merely peaceful creatures who want to coexist in their small corner of the ocean. People have a responsibility to protect them and help them enjoy their simple lives in the sea. Hopefully, this species of gentle giants will have a long and happy life on this planet.

Bibliography

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