

DUGONG

Opportunistic sighting of *Dugong dugon* from the nearshore waters of South Andaman



Dugong sighting at Burmanallah, South Andaman, India

IUCN Red List:
Vulnerable (Marsh &
Sobczick 2015)

Mammalia
[Class of Mammals]

Sirenia
[Order of large aquatic
herbivorous mammals]

Dugongidae
[Family of dugongs]

Dugong dugon
[Dugong]

Species described by
Müller in 1776

Dugong is the only herbivorous mammal that is strictly marine (Marsh et al. 1982). It is long-living and feeds exclusively on seagrass, especially those belonging to the genera *Halodule* and *Halophila* (Marsh et al. 1999). It is generally found in shallow waters spending 72% of their day in depths <3m (Chilvers et al. 2004), but were also observed in waters up to depths of 37m (Ripple & Perrine 1999). Dugong and all other marine mammals are protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 in India (Vivekanandan & Rajagopalan 2011). In India, its presence was recorded at Palk Bay, Gulf of Mannar, Gulf of Kutch, and Andaman & Nicobar Islands (D'Souza & Patankar 2011; Vivekanandan & Jeyabaskaran 2012; D'Souza et al. 2013; Malakar et al. 2015; Venu & Malakar 2015). Declared as the state animal of Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Dugong was once abundant in the islands, but its

abundance and distribution are poorly known at present, with only around 200 individuals present along the coastline of India (D'souza & Patankar 2011; Sivakumar 2013). The decline in the population of the animal was recorded by about 60% over the last two decades in Andaman & Nicobar Islands (D'souza et al. 2013). Sightings of marine mammals play an important role in understanding their diversity, distribution, abundance, and behaviour patterns. Reporting on opportunistic sightings is important data as a dedicated system of long-term monitoring on marine mammals is still lacking in Indian waters (Malakar et al. 2015).

Dugong was sighted opportunistically in shallow nearshore waters of Burmanallah, South Andaman (11.577° N, 92.741° E) on 28 April 2018 during one of the regular coral reef surveys while snorkelling. Images and videos of the mammal were taken using Canon PowerShot G1X Mark II camera with Canon WP-DC53 waterproof case. The species was identified following Vivekanandan & Jeyabaskaran (2012). The coordinates of the location were recorded using a handheld GPS device (Garmin etrex Vista H).

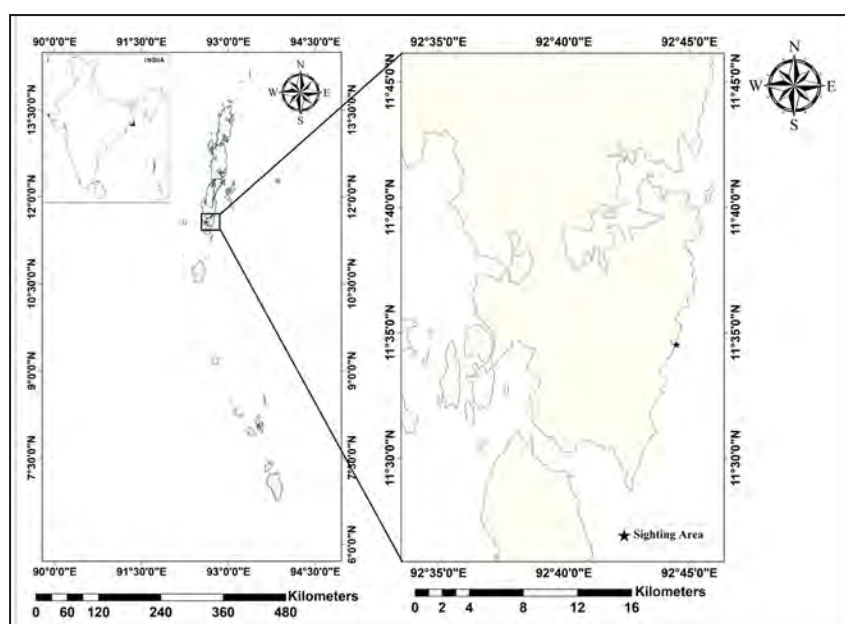
The animal was observed first when it approached one of the authors swimming at the reef edge where the sandy bottom begins. This approach behaviour of the animal can be regarded as the observer-directed behaviour mentioned in D'Souza & Patankar (2009). The animal disappeared for 1–2 min before reappearing for a longer stay.

The animal was healthy and about 3–3.5 m in length. Sex of the animal could not be determined because of poor visibility. It stayed with the authors, swimming for about 4–5 min at an approximate distance of 1–2 m before disappearing towards the north into deeper waters. The depth at the site was 5–6 m.

Marine mammals play very essential roles in the marine ecosystem. They

Global Distribution :

Native: Australia, Bahrain, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, India (Andaman Is., Laccadive Is., Nicobar Is.), Indonesia, Japan (Nansei-shoto), Jordan, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mayotte, Mozambique, New Caledonia, Palau, Papua New Guinea (Bismarck Archipelago), Philippines, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand, Timor-Leste, United Arab Emirates, Vanuatu, Viet Nam, Yemen (Socotra)
Regionally extinct: Mauritius, Taiwan (Marsh & Soltzick 2015)



The study site at Burmanallah, South Andaman, India

are the apex predators, primary or secondary consumers, and also indicators of marine ecosystem health (Dierauf & Gulland 2001; Wells et al. 2004; Estes et al. 2011). Hunting, accidental bycatch, and habitat destruction make Dugong endangered (Vivekanandan & Jeyabaskaran 2012). This is the second sighting of the animal in Burmanallah after Malakar et al. (2015) sighted the animal five years ago.

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