Ecological studies on the *Dugong dugon* of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands: A step towards species conservation

By
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project members</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study area</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although widely distributed, little is known about the dugong in most of the areas of occurrence. In India, information about the animal is patchy and restricted to sighting, stranding and mortality records. Historically dugongs were abundant in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, but hunting and habitat loss has led to the decline in their numbers. Conservation efforts for dugongs around the Andaman and Nicobar islands have been hindered due to the vastness of the area and a lack of understanding of the species and its habitat. Our project aimed at gaining local knowledge of the species through a study on its habitat and characteristics of seagrass meadows that affect site use by dugongs. The project was also targeted to increase awareness among local communities in order to contribute to an increased protection of the animal. Through our project, we have identified seagrass meadows that are used and likely to be used by dugongs, carried out education programs in different villages where dugongs are known to occur and identified seagrass meadow characteristics that lead to habitat use by dugongs. The study forms a baseline for future studies and importance of dugong habitat monitoring on a longer timescale is outlined.
Introduction

**Background**
The sea cow, *Dugong dugon* (Muller) is the only existing species of the Dugongidae family in the Order Sirenia, the others being extinct. It is a herbivore and inhabits coastal and near shore waters. The documented geographical range of the dugong extends over the coastal waters of almost 37 countries ranging from east Africa, through south and south-east Asia to Australia. Though widely distributed, little is known about the animal in most of the areas of occurrence. This herbivorous mammal, inhabiting the marine environment was once abundant in many parts of its range but numbers have declined and its area of occupancy has decreased in recent times due to exploitation and loss of habitat. The dugong is currently listed in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as being vulnerable to extinction. In India, dugongs have been given the highest level of legal protection and listed under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

In India, dugongs have been reported from the Gulf of Kutch in the north-west, Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay in southeast and the Andaman and Nicobar islands (Annandale 1905; James 1974; Jones 1959, 1980; Jonklaas 1961; Lal Mohan 1963, 1976, 1980; Mani 1960; Nair et al. 1975; Prater 1928; Silas 1961; Silas & Fernando 1985, Husar 1978; Jones 1980; James 1988). There are no records from further north along the east coast of India or from the Sunderbans (Nishiwaki & Marsh 1985), although there are records from the Chittagong coast of Bangladesh and Burmese waters (Yin 1971). They were previously reported (as seals) along the west coast of India (Jerdon 1874), from salt water inlets off the south Malabar and Konkan coasts as far north as Canara (which corresponds to southern Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka and Kerala today). The occurrence of dugongs along the Malabar Coast was also mentioned in the Imperial Gazetteer (Anon 1909). Dugongs have also been reported from the Maldives and Laccadive Islands (Husar 1975) but are now believed to be extinct (Jethva and Solanki 2008).

Dugongs were common in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands until the 1950s but currently there are only sporadic sightings and poaching records (Das and Dey 1999). A first study on the distribution of seagrass meadows was carried out in 1995. This study estimated, presence of 40 dugongs based on interviews with fishermen and regular divers (Das and Dey, 1999). Das and Dey (1999) estimated around 40 dugongs in 1994-95 based on chance encounters with fishers and dive operators. D’souza and Patankar (2008; 2009) sighted three dugongs in the wild at Neil, Havelock and Kodiaghat Islands in the southern Andaman Islands, and three dugongs were sighted near Neil Island by Jethva and Solanki (2008). In 2008, we collated all available information on dugong occurrences from records available since 1956 and found that there were 58 records of mortality in the past 50 years and in the past 20 years there were 10 records of mortality indicating a possibility of a further decline in numbers since the 1999 report.

**Aim and objectives**
Given these more current estimates of the dugong population in the Andaman and
Nicobar islands, this population could already be genetically extinct with its surviving members restricted to isolated pockets of interacting individuals. Further, the limited information on the habitat and the vastness of the area had been hindering conservation efforts. Under these circumstances, it was imperative to identify the present dugong habitats across the islands and understand how dugongs use these habitats in space and time. The present study was therefore aimed at identifying all dugong habitats and characteristics of seagrass meadows that are responsible for habitat use.
## Project members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Academic qualifications</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Role in the project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elrika D'souza</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>PhD Student</td>
<td>Has been part of 3 research projects in the Andaman and Nicobar island, familiar with the area and has a good rapport with local communities and authorities</td>
<td>Team Leader&lt;br&gt;Carry out field surveys&lt;br&gt;Communicate research findings to stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vardhan Patankar</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>PhD Student</td>
<td>Has been part of 2 research projects in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, familiar with the area, trained SCUBA diver</td>
<td>Carry out field surveys&lt;br&gt;Data analysis&lt;br&gt;Documentation (Photography and Video)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saw Yoayela</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>A good swimmer and skin diver, familiar with the area</td>
<td>Assist in field surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euriel</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>Has worked with researchers in the past, familiar with the area</td>
<td>Assist in field surveys&lt;br&gt;Interpreter in the Nicobar Islands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Andaman and Nicobar groups of islands are one of the most biodiversity-rich regions of India (Davidar et al., 1994) and are located in the south-eastern part of the Bay of Bengal, between Latitude 60° and 14° N and longitude 91° and 94° E (Srinivasan, 1986). This group, commonly known as the Bay islands, consisting of more than 300 islands, stretches from Landfall Island in the North to the Great Nicobar Islands in the south. Biogeographically the 10 degree channel separates the 2 island groups into the Andaman archipelago and Nicobar archipelago (Rodgers and Panwar, 1988). The Andamans are considered to be extensions of the Arakan Yomas range, a southward trending branch of the eastern Himalayas that merges in the north with the ranges in north-east India ridges. The Nicobar group is the continuation of the Mentaweri islands to the south and south west of Sumatra (Rodolofo, 1969; Das, 1999c) (Fig. 1). The 5,000 km² Andaman Islands are in the south-east Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean. The archipelago comprises 4 large islands, North, Middle, Baratang and South Andaman Islands and surrounded by many small isolated islands (Davidar et al., 1994). The 2,000 km² Nicobar comprises 21 large and small islands, of which 12 are inhabited (Fig. 1). The western side of these islands is strongly influenced by waves and currents during the south-west monsoon of May-September. The eastern side is influenced by waves and currents during the north-east monsoon of September-January (Fig. 1). The islands contain some of the last remaining pristine rainforest habitats, with unique assemblage of flora and fauna distinct from the mainland (Rodgers and Panwar, 1988) and form the western boundary of the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot (Mayers et al., 2000).
Methods

Based on a past report on seagrass meadows and information from fishermen and regular sea-farers, we prepared a rough map of the distribution of seagrass meadows and accessed each of these meadows by boat. At each meadow we searched for the feeding trails of dugongs by snorkelling. Dugong feeding trails are serpentine cleared patches with seagrass along the edges. Meadows that had feeding trails was marked as sites used by dugongs. We also collected data on variables such as depth, fragmentation of a meadow (classified as patchy or continuous), exposure and size of meadow. Samples of seagrasses from each meadow were collected within 20X20 cm quadrats. These samples were analysed for seagrass species composition and shoot density and then sun-dried and stored for further analysis. All data was entered in Excel worksheets.

We then compared data on the distribution of seagrass meadows pre-tsunami and that obtained during our present survey and represented it on a map to see if the tsunami had an affect on seagrass meadows. We also compared the past records on dugong occurrences with the present site occupancy data and represented it on a map. A map on the present distribution of dugong habitat was also prepared. All maps were prepared using Quantum GIS software.
Based on the past data on seagrass meadows and secondary information, we surveyed sixteen seagrass meadows around the Andaman and Nicobar islands. From all the seagrass meadows we collected quantative information on the distribution of these meadows along with information on habitat use by dugongs and meadow characteristics (Table 1).

Five of the sixteen meadows surveyed showed the presence of dugong feeding trails (Fig.1). Data on sighting records showed that dugong occurrences have reduced in the past fifty years and are now restricted to four sites around the Andaman islands and three sites around the Nicobar islands which coincide with the records of feeding signs obtained during the present survey (Fig.2).

A comparison of seagrass distribution prior to the tsunami of 2004 (Fig.3) showed that a few meadows around the central and southern Nicobar group of islands were absent after the tsunami (Fig.4).

We found two characteristics of the meadow that governed dugong habitat use namely, seagrass species composition and the spread of seagrass within a meadow. All seagrass meadows that had dugong feeding signs comprised *Halophila ovalis* and *Halodule uninervis*. Within each of these meadows, seagrass shoots were spread evenly and continuously.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Site name</th>
<th>Feeding signs</th>
<th>Seagrass species composition</th>
<th>Shoot density</th>
<th>Depth (0-5=1, 6-10=2, &gt;10=3)</th>
<th>Meadow size (m²)</th>
<th>Exposure</th>
<th>Spread</th>
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<tr>
<td>Great Nicobar</td>
<td>B-Quarry</td>
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<td>Halodule uninervis</td>
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<td>Halophila Minor</td>
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<td>60000</td>
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<td>Absent</td>
<td>Enhalus</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>Patchy</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Neil</td>
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<td>Beach Front</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Butler Bay</td>
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Table 1: Summary of data collected
Figure 2: Dugong occurrences based on sighting, stranding and mortality records
Figure 1: Seagrass meadows that showed the presence of dugong feeding signs
Figure 3: Distribution of seagrass meadows prior to the tsunami of 2004
Figure 4: The present distribution of seagrass meadows

Andaman & Nicobar Islands, India

Grid size: 0.12 x 0.12 degrees
Seagrass meadow distribution (after Tsunami of 2004)

- Info not available
- Absent
- Present

0 20 kilometers
Dugongs were once abundant across the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Occurrences were spread across the island chain. A comparison of past records indicates that there has been a decline in sightings and the areas of occupancy have now reduced to a few isolated pockets around some islands. The increasing anthropogenic pressures coupled with the higher frequencies of catastrophic disturbances could be responsible for declines in habitat quality and subsequently dugong populations.

The tsunami of 2004 resulted in the loss of some seagrass meadows where dugongs were reported in the past. There is a possibility that the populations in these regions were affected and perished or migrated to nearby seagrass meadows or neighbouring islands. However, the absence of prior data makes it difficult to confirm mortality or migration. Under these circumstances, monitoring the present dugong habitats is important along with attention to sites with past records to see if habitats have recovered and dugongs once again use the habitats.

A comparison with past and present occurrences shows that although reduced, locations of sightings and consequently areas of occupancy of dugongs have remained the same since the past 50 years. This is possibly due to the persistence of seagrass meadows in these areas. It is known that there is seasonality in production within seagrass meadows. As spread of seagrass within a meadow was identified as one of the factors affecting dugong habitat use, there could be a variation in spread across seasons which could affect habitat use at different times of the year. We will be investigating this idea as the follow-up work to this project.

With the data available on present dugong occurrences, it is possible for managers to concentrate conservation efforts on these sites so that further mortality of dugongs is reduced. As all seagrass habitats around the islands could not be surveyed due to logistic and weather constraints, there is a possibility of identifying more sites used by dugongs and hence this study needs to be continued along with conservation efforts in the identified areas.

The study forms a baseline for future studies and could also serve as an example and importance of dugong habitat monitoring on a longer timescale is outlined. Based on the success, this project can form a case study and can be replicated in other parts of India where dugongs are known to occur. With India signing an MoU at the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory species of wild animals (CMS) in 2008 under the United Nations Environment programme, the results of the study will contribute to global conservation efforts of dugongs.
Acknowledgements

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