

Our environment

DIVING WITH DUGONGS:

Vanuatu is home to many dugongs but not only can they be shy and elusive, they are protected and tourists are encouraged to treat them with sensitivity if they are lucky enough to encounter them when diving.

DIVING with a dugong is one of the most memorable dive experiences you can have. You might be one of the lucky few to have that experience in Vanuatu.

"It is a pretty special and unique encounter when you meet a dugong underwater," says Christina Shaw, who runs a local conservation NGO, The Vanuatu Environmental Science Society (VESS). Christina is also married to Andrew Hibgame, one of the owners of Big Blue Dive and Snorkel. They met diving in Vanuatu and have shared the experience of diving with dugongs several times.

"It is not common to have an interaction with a wild animal where the animal seems to be just as curious about you and appears to be comfortable in your company. We don't have a dive site where we will always see dugongs, but sometimes they will come to Mele Bay to our dive sites. We have even seen them from the shore, swimming close to the seafront just in front of the Big Blue shop", says Christina.

Globally dugongs are classed as vulnerable to extinction on the IUCN Red List of threatened species and

their numbers are in decline. They are dependent on seagrass, their main diet, for survival. Christina and her team at VESS are working with communities in several locations in Vanuatu to help the dugongs survive and keeping their seagrass habitat healthy. The biggest threats to dugongs globally are declines in seagrass habitats and getting caught in fishing nets. In Vanuatu tourism activities have also been suggested as another problem for the dugongs.

Unintended threats

Tourism can be a useful tool for conservation of threatened species by increasing awareness and their worth to the local population. However it can be detrimental

too. If tourism activities disturb dugongs it can have impacts on their health and reproduction. To try to make sure that tourism activities in Vanuatu are not harming the dugongs, VESS has published guidelines for how to interact with dugongs in the water.

"Dugongs have different personalities, just like people, some are sociable and are happy to be close to people and some don't want any interaction and will immediately swim away when they see a person or hear a boat. They are highly intelligent animals and have good memories (their closest land relatives are elephants, known for their exceptional memory).

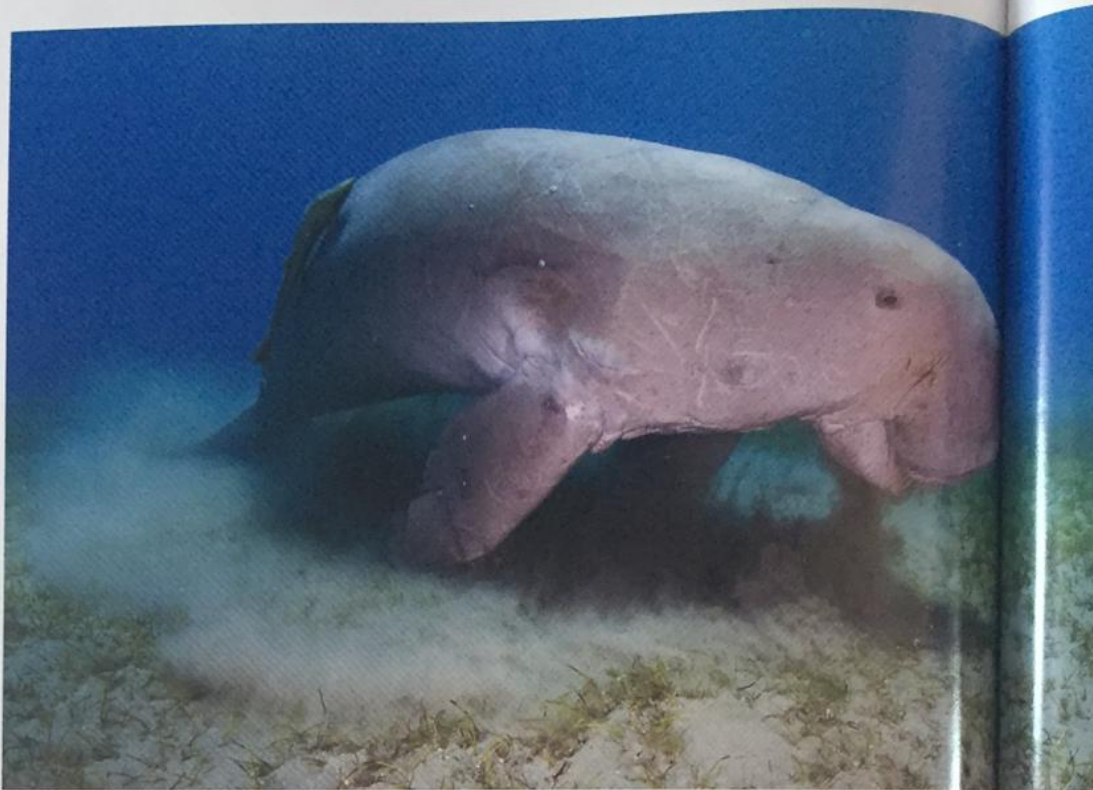
"Dugongs will remember interactions they have with humans

and it can shape the reactions they will have to people in the future. Our goal is that every interaction a dugong has with humans is a pleasant one. We hope this means our dugongs will remain happy and healthy and feel comfortable when people come in to their habitat," she said.

"We would like people to have a memorable experience when they see a dugong in our waters but not to the detriment of the dugongs", explains Christina.

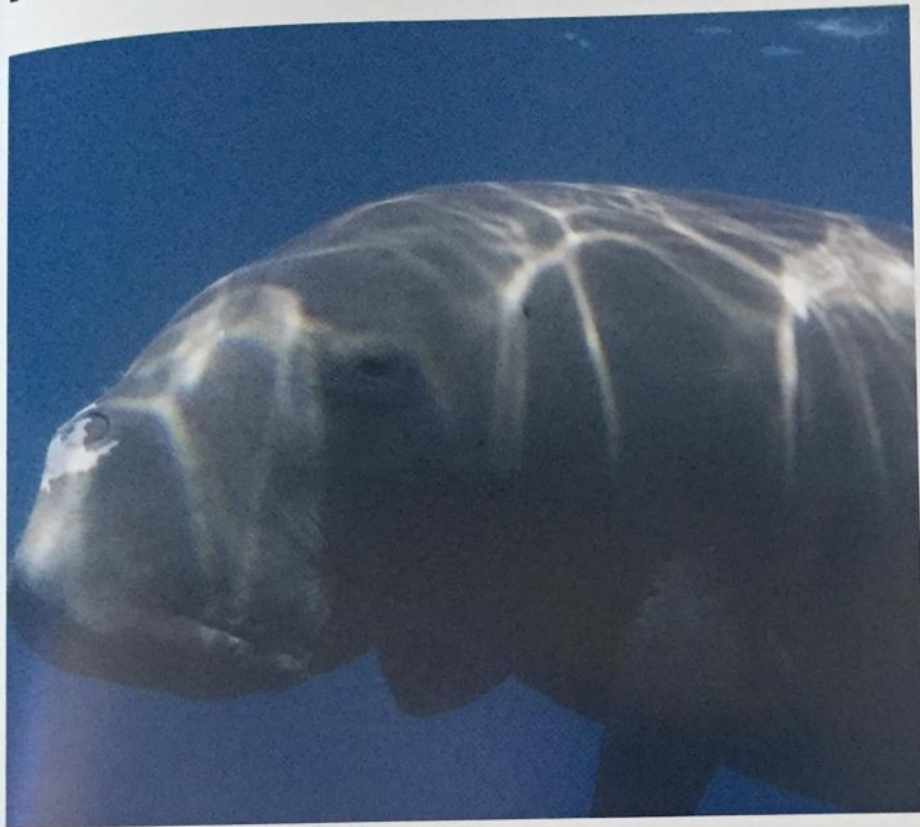
Happy to hang about

"For a really memorable encounter, if you are lucky enough to see a dugong when you are diving, you should stay where you are and let the dugong come to you if it



PICTURES: Big Blue and Dugong and Seagrass Conservation Project

IF YOU'RE LUCKY



wants to. There is no point in trying to swim after a dugong that is swimming away from you – you will never catch up with it and you might cause it stress. Remaining calm and swimming slowly will give you the best chance for the dugong to stay in the area. Sometimes we just get a fleeting glimpse. But sometimes a dugong stays nearby for longer and either feeds or gives itself a rub on the mooring lines, happy for divers to witness their fascinating behaviours,” Christina said.

“Some people see a dugong when they are learning to dive on their open water course and some of our regular divers have never encountered one” says Mike Crawford, co owner and manager at Big Blue.

“You just have to be lucky and in the right place at the right time. Occasionally a mother and calf will come by during a dive and we have even seen a mother lying on the sand and feeding her calf right in front of the divers. But we certainly can’t guarantee seeing dugongs: they will come and find us if they are in the area and if they want to.

“We at Big Blue hope that everyone will stick to these new guidelines, so that our Vanuatu dugongs will continue to be comfortable sharing their underwater world with divers, and visitors to Vanuatu will be able to have this special experience for years to come.”

Dugongs can be seen nearly everywhere in Vanuatu so watch

out and you might see a dugong’s nose popping up out of the water when it breathes. But please also be careful when you are having fun in the water, especially if you are in a boat or a jetski to make sure you don’t scare them and our Vanuatu dugongs stay happy and healthy.

Dugong facts

- Dugongs are marine mammals: They have lungs and need to come to the surface to breath air; They suckle their young from mammary glands located just behind their front flippers.
- Dugongs can weight up to 500Kg (average 300kg) and they can grow to over 3 metres in length. Calves are about 1 metre when they are born.
- Dugongs eat seagrass. They can

eat up to 40KG of seagrass a day.

- Dugongs can live up to 70 years.
- Dugongs become mature between 4 and 13 years of age. They usually have one calf every 2 to 5 years. Mothers carry their calves for between 13 and 15 months and suckle the calves for 18 months.

Conservation facts

The full guideline and information about dugongs are available on the VESS website: www.vanuatuconservation.org. The guidelines were developed by the Vanuatu Environmental Science Society (VESS) under the Dugong and Seagrass Conservation Project. This Project is executed by the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, with financing from the GEF, implementation support by UN Environment and technical support from the CMS Dugong MoU Secretariat. The project in Vanuatu was implemented by VESS and supported by the Department of Environmental Protection and Conservation, the Vanuatu Fisheries Department and the Department of Tourism

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