

Country Overview: Timor-Leste

Introduction

Timor-Leste has only one Marine Protected Area (MPA), which forms part of the Nino Konis Santana National Park, consisting of 586 km² out of a total 1,257 km². The country's marine environmental conservation and research sectors are poorly developed, with limited national or civil society engagement in marine issues.

Dugong Population

There are substantial knowledge gaps regarding the distribution and abundance of dugongs in Timor-Leste. Population size and characteristics remain unknown; while recent sightings have been made on the north coast, there is no information on the presence or distribution of dugongs on the southern side of Timor-Leste, and little is known about the location of the main feeding habitats for the species.

Seagrass Habitat

The narrow reef flats on the north coast are dominated by seagrass beds in shallow waters (more than 2,200 hectares), but the distribution of seagrasses to the south of the island remains unknown. Seven genera are known to exist around Timor-Leste: *Halodule*, *Halophila*, *Enhalus*, *Cymodocea*, *Syringodium*, *Thalassia*, and *Thalassodendron*.

Cultural Significance

Considered sacred animals in much of this area, dugongs are not actively hunted; however, the species and its habitat do suffer degradation as a result of destructive fishing practices, coastal planning, boat strikes, etc. Furthermore, incidentally trapped individuals are often killed and consumed.

Current Threats and Conservation Measures

Threats to dugongs and their seagrass habitat in Timor-Leste include deforestation, over-fishing and both targeted and accidental by-catch, and destructive development activities. Dugong mortality has not been reported in Timor-Leste in recent years, but the use of gillnets in nearshore waters by coastal fishers is increasing, which poses a growing threat to the species.

Dugongs are protected under the Marine Protected Species Act, and reference to their endangered status is made in the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). The NBSAP describes the importance of seagrass ecosystems not only as the primary habitat for dugongs and many fish and shellfish species, but also as a protective barrier for coral reefs against sedimentation. However, the people of Timor-Leste, including decision-makers, are largely unaware of dugongs, their status, and the importance of seagrass ecosystems to the coastal environment.

Key legislation	Content
UNTAET Regulation No. 19/2000> on Protected Places Government Decree No. 5/2004	General Regulation on fishing
Ministerial Diploma No. 04/115/G [M]/lv/2005 >	List of Protected Aquatic Species
Ministerial Diploma No. 06/42/GM/l/2005	Fisheries crimes
Government Resolution No. 8/2007	Establishment of the Nino Konis Santa National Park
Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (2002):	Fundamental Principles, Objectives of the State; Sections 61, 96, 139 relating to environmental and natural resource protection, preservation, and sustainable use.

GEF Projects

Under the GEF Dugong and Seagrass Conservation Project, national-level partners in Timor-Leste will be trained in seagrass and dugong research techniques to overcome existing knowledge barriers regarding the distribution, status and ecology of seagrass ecosystems and dugong populations (TL1), and priority sites for dugong and seagrass conservation efforts will be identified.

TL4 will design a “Tool Box” of materials and media to illustrate the importance of dugong and seagrass habitats, explain their benefits to local people, outline options for their protection, and communicate dugong and seagrass related laws and regulations to target groups. Community festival events will also be used to generate awareness.

A model for marine conservation ecotourism will be developed to incentivise local engagement in dugong and seagrass conservation (TL2). This project component will pioneer a model to diversify livelihoods among target coastal communities, generating a sustained source of income for the target population to encourage community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) activities for priority seagrass ecosystems and small-scale fisheries.

TL3 aims to strengthen and operationalise an inter-ministerial mechanism to ensure a coordinated approach to national-level coastal zone planning and decision-making which effectively addresses dugong and seagrass conservation. The project will strengthen national-level understanding of the importance of seagrass areas by linking their health to the economic value of fisheries and the potential for eco-tourism opportunities related to dugongs. It also aims to enable adaptable management planning and active ownership over the use of natural resources by local communities.

A National Facilitating Committee (NFC) will be established to assist national capacity-building and mobilise decision-maker support for dugong and seagrass conservation (TL5), and to work with Project partners, sharing their data, lessons learned and experience of dugong and seagrass ecosystem conservation.

Project Partners

Project	Title	Partner
TL1	Identification of priority sites for conservation of dugongs and seagrasses in Timor-Leste	Conservation International Foundation (CI)
TL2	Incentivising community engagement in dugong and seagrass conservation in Timor-Leste through volunteer ecotourism	Blue Ventures Conservation (BV)
TL3	Mainstreaming dugongs and their seagrass habitats in national coastal zone planning and decision-making	Conservation International Foundation (CI)
TL4	National-level awareness campaign to champion dugong and seagrass conservation	Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Environment – National Directorate for Biodiversity Protection and Restoration (MCIE–NDBPR)
TL5	Timor-Leste National Facilitating Committee	Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Environment – National Directorate for Biodiversity Protection and Restoration (MCIA–NDBPR)