



FAST FACTS about



WEST INDIAN MANATEES

DESCRIPTION

The West Indian manatee is a large, gray marine mammal with a wrinkled face, a snout covered in whiskers, two flippers to propel itself through the water, and a body that tapers into a flat, paddle-shaped tail. The average adult manatee is 10 feet (~3m) long and weighs between 800 – 1,200 pounds (350 – 550 kg).

There are three species of West Indian manatee as identified by their geographic ranges, but here, we are most interested in the Florida manatee!



HABITAT AND BEHAVIOR

Florida manatees frequent shallow, slow-moving rivers, estuaries, saltwater bays, and canals, migrating along the coast throughout the year. During the winter, they concentrate in Florida and are even found here, at the FSUCML in our boat basin, as well as in the Ochlockonee, Sopchoppy, Wakulla, and St. Marks rivers and Wakulla Springs. In the summer, they migrate further north along the coasts of Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina, but have been spotted as far west as Texas and as far north as Massachusetts.

Manatees are gentle and sluggish, spending most of their time either resting or eating. They feed primarily on plants, but sometimes inadvertently swallow small fish and invertebrates while browsing. They can consume 10–15% of their body weight daily, and they must surface to breathe air.

The Florida subspecies of the West Indian manatee are endangered and protected under federal law by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, and the Florida Manatee Sanctuary Act of 1978.



LIFESPAN AND REPRODUCTION

These manatees have no natural enemies, and can live for 60 years or more. Part of their mortality is attributed to natural causes such as cold stress, gastrointestinal disease, pneumonia, and other diseases, while the rest is human-induced, mostly attributed to collisions with watercrafts. If not killed, manatees often suffer serious injuries from these events.

They reach sexual maturity at about five years of age. They have low reproductive rates, producing only one calf every two to five and long gestation periods, about one year. Mothers nurse their young for one to two years.