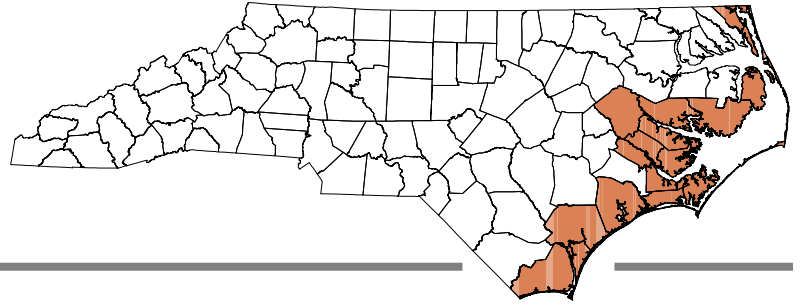

West Indian manatee

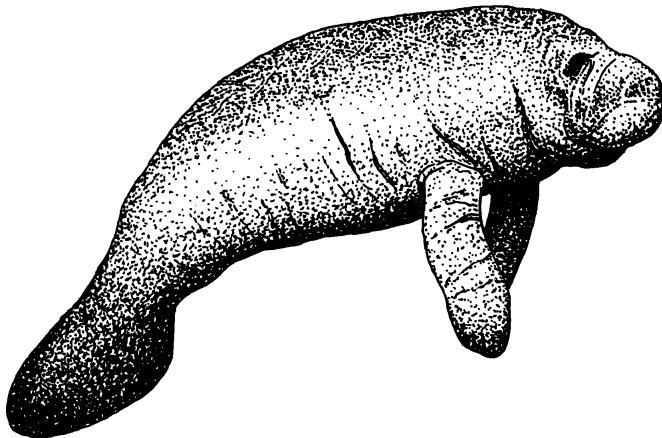
Trichechus manatus

Endangered (June 2, 1970)



Description: The manatee is a massive, barrel-shaped aquatic mammal with a broad head and large stiffly bristled, fleshy lips that overhang and hide the lower jaw. Both the eyes and external ears are minute in relation to body size. The tough, 2-inch-thick skin is uniformly gray to gray-brown, wrinkled, and nearly hairless. It is often scarred and covered with barnacles, algae, and other crustaceans. The forearms are short and paddle-like and are used for locomotion, scratching, touching and embracing other manatees, manipulating food, and cleaning their mouths. Hind limbs are lacking and the tail is horizontally flattened and rounded. Adults are 7-13 ft long and may weight 11,000-13,000 lb. Sexes are distinguished by the position of the genital opening and presence or absence of mammary glands.

Life History: Manatees are essentially solitary animals, but will exist in loosely organized groups of 2-6. The strongest social unit is the family, which consists of a cow and calf. Fecundity is low with no definite breeding season known. Sexual maturity is reached between 4 and 9 years. Females usually breed once every 2.5-3 years, producing one calf after 11 months of gestation. Young remain with the mother for several years. Herbivorous, they consume almost exclusively submerged aquatic vegetation but sometimes eat shoreline vegetation. They spend 5 hours a day feeding and may consume 4-9% of the body weight in 1 day. They may not need fresh water but have been observed drinking fresh



water from hoses, culverts and sewage outfalls. They often feed at night, locating food by touch and smell.

Habitat: Wholly aquatic, manatees inhabit warm shallow seas near shore, salt water bays, and estuarine habitats. They live in both fresh and salt water and move up sluggish rivers and canals for variable distances. Factors that influence habitat choice are (1) availability of food, (2) sufficient water depth of 1.5 to 6 m, (3) access to warm water during cold winter weather, and (4) source of fresh water required for osmoregulation.

Distribution: The manatee is known from shallow waters of subtropical regions of the Atlantic coast ranging from coastal North Carolina to the Florida Keys, Gulf of Mexico and west to the Louisiana coast. Habitat is restricted to warm waters. They are migratory and have been recorded in North Carolina waters from June to October. They may overwinter in warm water discharges from coastal North Carolina power plants from October to April. Reported in Beaufort, Brunswick, Carteret, Craven, Currituck, Dare, Hyde, New Hanover, Onslow*, Pamlico, Pender, and Pitt counties.

Threats: The greatest enemy to manatee survival is humans. Collisions with motor boats and propellers cause the greatest numbers of injuries and death to these slow swimmers. Other threats to the species are predation by humans for hide, meat, and oil; harassment by swimmers and boaters; death from entanglement and drowning in fishing nets, lines and flood-gates; and loss of habitat to pollution, dredging, and filling.

Management Recommendations: Enforcement of laws against death and injury, pursuit, and harassment. Protection and restoration of habitat.

* No record has been reported in this county in the past 20 years.

Sources: Clark 1987b, Cooper et al. 1977, Terwilliger et al. 1995, Webster et al 1985.