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New UN project uses financial incentives to try to save the dugong



Many of the world's remaining dugong populations are at serious risk of extinction

14 March 2011 – The dugong, the reputed mermaid of seafarers' lore, was today thrown a lifeline by a United Nations pilot project that uses financial incentives to curb direct hunting or incidental by-catch of the large marine mammal amid concerns it could become extinct within 40 years.

The project, launched in the small Pacific island State of Palau by the country's President Johnson Toribiong, is one of several undertaken by the UN Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) and the inter-governmental South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) to protect the creature, which plays a significant ecological role in the functioning of coastal habitats.

Promoted under the Pacific Year of the Dugong 2011, the projects seek to reduce hunting and by-catch of the creature, which sailors once took for a mermaid when spotted from afar, by providing incentives for behavioural change in local communities with loans or payments for ecosystem services, lessening their catches or changing to more dugong-friendly fishing gear.

“Financial incentives will be promoted to make sure that conservation needs and sustainable development are reconciled at the community level,” [said](#) Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, Executive Secretary of CMS, whose Secretariat is provided by the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)).

Also known as the sea cow, the dugong, the world's only herbivorous marine mammal, lives in warm coastal and island waters from East Africa to Vanuatu in the Pacific. The major causes of mortality are poaching, unsustainable hunting, entanglement in fishing gear, vessel strikes and habitat degradation.

The action plan developed under a UNEP/CMS Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of Dugongs and their Habitats provides the framework for regional cooperation for long-term protection in the Indian Ocean, South-East Asia, South Asia, Australia and the Pacific Islands.

Most of the world's remaining dugong populations outside of Australia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are at serious risk of disappearing without effective and timely conservation action. Governments, international and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were warned at a gathering convened by CMS in Abu Dhabi, UAE, last October that the mammal was threatened with extinction within 40 years.

Gillnets, used in almost 90 per cent of the dugong's habitat, threaten its survival, and reducing mortality in fisheries remains the greatest challenge. Providing financial incentives to encourage the fishing community to replace harmful gillnets with alternative equipment such as line-fishing gear to reduce by-catch is one option being considered in the pilot projects.

Under conservation agreements with the communities, the ecological and economic value of sea-grass habitats would be protected and livelihood incentives for coastal communities would be guaranteed, many of whom rely on sustainable small-scale fisheries.

In some parts of the Pacific Islands, such as the Torres Strait between Papua New Guinea and Australia, hunting for direct consumption is the legal right of traditional inhabitants and sustainable hunting levels need to be agreed as part of the action plan.

Two other pilot projects are currently being developed in Daru, Papua New Guinea, and Bazaruto Bay in Mozambique. At least five initiatives in all will be tested in sites across the Indian Ocean, South-East Asia, South Asia, and Pacific Islands regions over the 2011-2013 period under the UNEP/CMS memorandum, which has so far garnered 18 signatories, who have agreed to fund the projects.

These are: Australia, Bahrain, Comoros, Eritrea, France, India, Kenya, Madagascar, Myanmar, Philippines, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Seychelles, Vanuatu, UAE, Tanzania and Yemen.

Dugong conservation efforts will have other benefits as they can have positive impacts across a wide range of habitats, in turn protecting other coastal marine species such as turtles, whales, dolphins and sharks.

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