

Doggone Dugong

by Mark Webster

Dugongs are a threatened species world wide and, although certain individuals are now being seen regularly in the Red Sea, they are still quite rare there it seems. After many years of diving in the southern Red Sea and searching for them in the appropriate places I have had only two encounters.

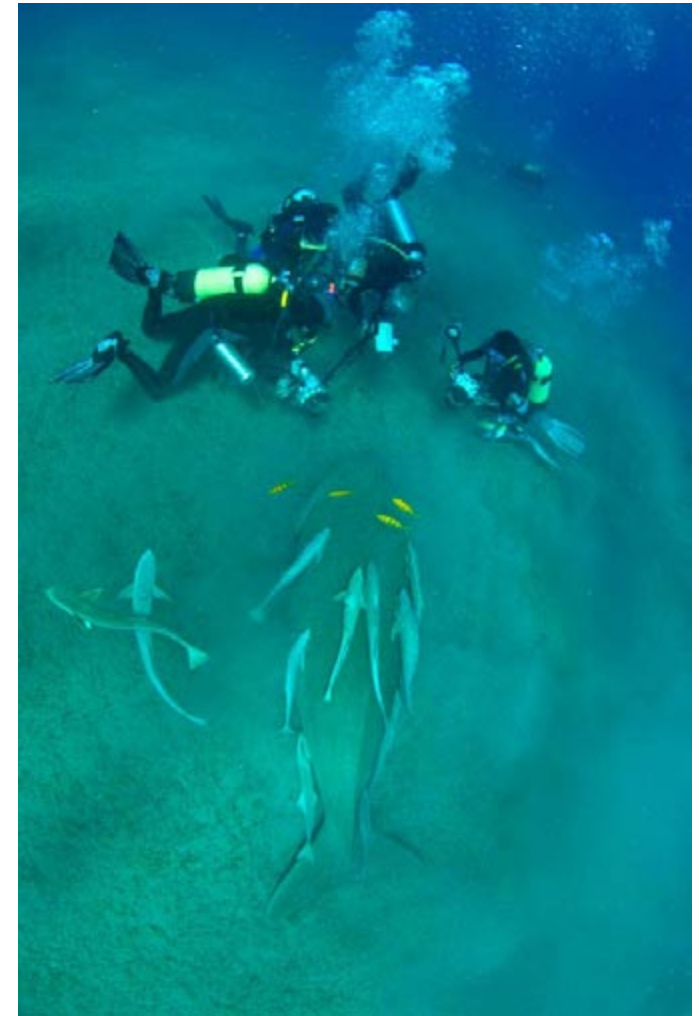
One particular Dugong at Marsa Abbu Dabbab, close to Marsa Alam, has become quite a celebrity over the past few years, but unfortunately the bay was closed to dive boats in 2007. Now the access to the bay is restricted to residents of a hotel on the shore or via the dive centre operated by that hotel. Having dived with this particular dugong in 2006 (after several fruitless previous visits looking for it!), I consequently thought that the chances of seeing another were pretty slim. However, there are several other bays between this location and Port Galib to the north that offer the same topography and seabed conditions which we knew would be attractive to Dugongs. Dugongs, along with green turtles, eat sea grass and so it seemed logical that if we could find the sea grass and turtles then there was a good chance that a dugong may also be resident, somewhere.....!

Dugongs (Dugong dugon) are the smallest members of the order Sirenia (commonly called sea cows) and are relatively rare world wide. As adults they are rarely more than 3m in length weighing in at up to 400kg and in protected habitats they can apparently live for 50 years or more. They are also listed as an endangered species by the Conservation



Dugongs will swim for the surface to breath with very little warning. Being aware of this will give you the chance to ascend with your subject (somewhat swiftly!) and get some head on and side portrait images. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/80.

of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) amongst others. Their natural predators in



The dugong seems totally unconcerned with the attentions of a group of photographers as this shot demonstrates. They are very territorial and will return to the same area each day to feed despite a human presence. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/50.

the Red Sea are sharks but they are probably at most risk from inshore boating activities and changes to their habitat due to coastal development.



Swimming with the dugong close to the surface provides an opportunity to capture the whole animal in clear water with a hint of Snell's window if you are lucky. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/125.

The name dugong appears to have originated from the Malay word duyung which means lady of the sea or mermaid, and of course sea cows in general are the stuff of seafaring legends created by amorous or frustrated sailors after long voyages in the days of sail. Although some may regard these mammals as attractive, I think that these sailors must have been particularly desperate to consider dugongs for anything other than an easy source of food – and they were often hunted as a result. Females

are also seen suckling their young at the surface from teats close to their flippers, which is also a source of the mermaid myth.

I regularly use the Blue Planet fleet of live aboards for my photo workshops and have developed a good rapport with our usual dive guide Ashraf who generously undertook the search whilst guiding other groups. When we returned in October this year he had struck gold, but of course with something as fickle as a wild mammal there would be no guarantees



When the dugong returns to the seabed it will resume feeding immediately and there will be only a few moments before other divers arrive. Nikon 200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 100 f8 1/60.

of a successful encounter. As our target bay was on the return route to Port Galib we had to wait until the end of the week before we could investigate, but in fact this was no hardship considering all that the Red Sea has to offer a photographer.

We arrived on location very early in the morning and had the luxury of being the only boat there. Several of us were standing on the upper deck whilst the boat moored when one of

the group remarked there seemed to be a large shark swimming by just under the surface a few metres from the stern – that's no shark that's a dugong! Our arrival had obviously disturbed the dugong, perhaps from her slumbers, and now she seemed to be heading from the shallows towards the centre of the bay hopefully, we thought, to feed on the sea grass.

Our established leisurely routine of tea and biscuits before the first



Swimming with the dugong towards the surface allows you to get a closer more intimate view and capture the endearing expression of these animals. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 100 f11 1/80.

dive of the day was discarded and there was a mad scramble to get ready for the dive. Perhaps half the group elected to search the sea grass for the dugong whilst the rest headed for the reef. Even though the dugong is a large beast it is still like looking for a needle in a haystack and for accurate location you need to be lucky enough to spot her coming to the surface for air to give you a general location to start. We were not this fortunate and so spent a fruitless 80 minutes searching in vain, although we did encounter several green turtles

munching contentedly on the sea grass and the occasional guitar shark in the distance. There is also some excellent macro life in the sea grass including seahorses, sail fin blennies and muck type critters such as dwarf lion fish, hermit crabs and even mimic octopus - but these have to be ignored for the sake of the search.

So having returned to the boat dejected we were still more distressed to see the arrival of several other live aboard boats for their final dives before returning to port – did they also know of this dugong? For the



Once the dugong resumes feeding the visibility will begin to degrade and the arrival of other divers with cameras will add to the problem. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/80.

second dive we decided to take the RIB to the farthest edge of the sea grass beds to start our search. As we approached the general area there was some discussion as to where we should start the dive when amazingly the dugong broke surface just 20m away to take air which prompted an immediate SBS style entry complete with cameras to ensure we did not lose sight of her (I am assuming throughout that the dugong is indeed female, better educated divers may be able to recognise the gender).

There she was below us in 15m

or so happily feeding on the eel grass and accompanied by up to 12 remora and several pilot fish. To begin with our small group was able to enjoy this magnificent creature undisturbed, but our frantic entry into had attracted the attention of the other boats and it was not long before two more RIBS arrived and deposited their divers on our location.

When the dugong is feeding there are only so many compositions available to you with or without a diver in the scene. In order to obtain a variety of compositions you need

to be aware of dugong behaviour and to have a certain level of fitness! In my limited experience the dugong is able to feed on the seabed for between 10-15 minutes before heading for the surface to breath. There is normally very little warning of this departure, but once the beast rises and begins to swim with its broad tail fluke then things begin to happen very quickly. So, as this happens there is an opportunity to shoot the dugong head on and perhaps a head and shoulders portrait from the side and then you have to decide whether you are going to try and stay with your subject as it heads for the surface.

If you obediently follow the warnings given by your computer then you probably won't like this bit and should skip to the next paragraph. Staying with the dugong requires some fast swimming and a reasonably fast ascent, but it will give you the opportunity to shoot some full body portraits from the side and below in open water. The attendant remoras and pilot fish all add to the scene and, if it is early in the morning, there is the chance of a portion of Snell's window around your subject as well. Hopefully not too many other divers are following below as the bubbles do detract from the scene!

Once the dugong reaches the surface she will swim for a few minutes whilst breathing, maintaining quite a fast pace. This is an opportunity to get below the subject and shoot a few silhouettes – you need to be quite familiar with your camera settings for these exposures and your housing controls to change settings quickly, but these techniques can be practised before such an opportunity arises. Eventually the dugong will begin to dive on quite a shallow trajectory and you may be tempted to give up at this point, but if you have



These tiny sail fin blennies are abundant in the sea grass but very difficult to spot due to their excellent camouflage. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f16 1/80.

On the edge of the sea grass beds a muck style environment dominates. Here a juvenile dwarf lion fish is hiding itself on the shaft of a tube anemone. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f16 1/50.

the energy then try to stay with your subject because when she reaches the seabed then this will be your best opportunity to get some shots with minimal suspension in the water. Once the dugong begins to feed again in earnest then the visibility will degrade quickly and the arrival of other divers will exacerbate the problem.

Lens choice for these encounters has to be wide. A 12-24mm or 10-17mm on DX and 14-24mm, 17-35mm on FX are good choices or



perhaps the 10.5mm (DX) and 15/16mm (FX) fish eyes. Sometimes the fish eye is just a little too wide although it would be the preferred choice for those shots closer to the surface to capture any available Snell's window. You will need suitably wide beam angle strobes for these lenses to add some fill light, but strobe positioning can become a challenge to avoid backscatter once the seabed is disturbed. If you do not intend to head for the surface then filters and natural light could work well and will cut the



By moving under the dugong you can position the sun behind the subject and capture a silhouette to inject some variety into the image sequence. This does require some nifty exposure changes whilst swimming pretty hard though! Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, ISO 200 f16 1/250.

risk of backscatter, although you may want to increase the ISO a stop or two to allow a faster shutter speed to freeze the action.

There has of course been some concerns over the amount of attention that these dugongs receive, in some cases on a daily basis. But they seem to be unperturbed and continue to inhabit and feed in the same area and just ignore the intrusion from divers and, in Marsa Abu Dabbab, hordes of daily snorkellers. My feeling is that, just like the green turtles which regard us with total disdain, the dugong does not see us as a threat or predator and not even, it seems, as a competitor to its food source. Most likely

the intrusion is now just something to be endured for a few hours in the morning before the boats depart for port once again. Getting close to a big creature in the water is always a thrill, but there is something even more appealing about these gentle and benign 'sea cows' which makes this experience and capturing good images truly memorable.

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