

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO  
FLORIDA'S MOST ICONIC MARINE MAMMAL

SECRETS OF THE  
**MANATEE**



**DIANE MORGAN**

# Diving Deeper

## Manatees and Their In-Laws (Not Whales)

Manatees are in a class by themselves. Beneath their gray pebbled hide, between their whiskery snouts and their paddle tail, is a mystery. The manatee has attributes unlike any other animal on earth (or in the ocean). Its metabolism is as slow as a sloth's, but it can swim as fast as dolphin, at least briefly. It can weigh a ton and a half, yet it glides through the water with the silent grace of an eel. It produces teeth in a conveyer-like way, seemingly unendingly. It can live in both fresh and brackish water. Manatees are untroubled by sharks and gators. They even tolerate human presence, when we invade their waters to "swim with the manatees." They get along swimmingly with their own kind but are perfectly self-sufficient, enjoying but not needing any better company than themselves. They are famously small brained, and yet science has shown that they can learn anything a dolphin can. (Brain size doesn't correlate with intelligence as well as one might think.) They possess uncanny wisdom.

People used to think that manatees were some sort of subtropical walrus, a forgivable error, despite the fact that the two marine mammals have little in common other than a large gray body and slightly wistful expression. In anatomy, physiology, distribution, evolutionary history, behavior, and diet (clams casino vs. the salad bar), they couldn't be more different. (Some sources claim they are "completely unrelated." Not true. All animals are related. It's just a question of how closely.)

At one time, these peaceful, long-lived mammals had an idyllic life. With no predators to bother them and no prey to bother themselves with, they could spend their days moseying from one rich underwater meadow to the next, gathering with friends, raising their calves, and working on their stamp collections. Then humans showed up.

Since our arrival to Florida (around seven thousand years or so ago), manatees have had a rough deal. These hapless creatures have been hunted by humans, hit by boats, gouged by propellers, and ridden by tourists as well as had their homes fouled by pollution. Less popular than their flashier fellow marine mammal, the dolphin, they have been under-researched and underappreciated. Many more scientists have devoted their careers to studying dolphins, whales, and even sharks.



An algae-encrusted manatee surrounded by fish. Everyone benefits: the manatee provides habitat for the algae; the algae protect the manatee from the sun; the fish eat the algae to prevent overgrowth; the manatee provides shade and protection for the fish. Source: Keith Ramos, USFWS ROYALTY FREE (PIXNIO-29372-3000x2008)

This lack of appreciation is exemplified by the nineteenth-century American author Herman Melville (1819–1891). In his very long, ghastly novel *Moby-Dick*, he wrote:

I am aware that down to the present time, the fish styled Lamatins [manatees] and Dugongs (Pig-fish and Sow-fish of the Coffins of Nantucket) are included by many naturalists among the whales. But as these pigfish are a nosy, contemptible set, mostly lurking in the mouths of rivers, and feeding on wet hay, and especially as they do not spout, I deny their credentials as whales; and have presented them with their passports to quit the Kingdom of Cetology.

Melville was not only dismissive of manatees, but he was also wrong about whales. He thought they were fish.

Let's get that straight right away. Manatees are mammals. They breathe air, give birth to live young, have warm blood, and even sport whiskers.

Manatees are not just mammals; they are *big* mammals. (The Florida manatee is the largest marine herbivore on earth.) Some of them are *really* big. A run-of-the-mill manatee weighs in at half a ton; a really huge one can top three thousand pounds. Indeed, all marine mammals attain a decent size, and some of them, like whales, are really huge. Manatees' massive size is their only real defense; they have no tusks, sharp teeth, or hooves.

The Florida manatee's official name is *Trichechus manatus latirostris*, which is admittedly quite a mouthful. It belongs to the order Sirenia (after the sirens of legend), the