The manatee in Haiti
Galen B. Rathbun, Charles A. Woods and Jose A. Ottenwalder

The future looks bleak for the manatee population in the waters around Haiti. Results of a survey conducted by the US Fish and Wildlife Service suggest that numbers have declined drastically over the last 50 years. The best hope for the few remaining is that the hunting expertise will vanish with the older generation.

West Indian manatee Trichechus manatus populations have declined in many countries in the Caribbean and Latin America. In order to understand the extent of the declines, the US Fish and Wildlife Service has been undertaking status surveys in cooperation with interested governments. In May 1982, a 12.5-hour aerial survey of the entire coast of Haiti revealed only eight manatees (Figure 1). Based on replicated flights in Puerto Rico (Powell et al., 1981), one might expect the difference between the lowest and highest counts of an island manatee population to differ by a factor of about four. Assuming the eight manatees counted in Haiti represent a minimum count, then a maximum count of 32 animals might be predicted if we had replicated the survey. According to six surveys completed in 1977, manatees appear to be more numerous in the adjacent Dominican Republic, where the average aerial survey count was 19.8, with a range of 11–41 (Belitsky and Belitsky, 1980). More information on hunting pressures, available habitats, and movements of manatees in Hispaniola are required to explain this possible disparity in numbers between the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

We interviewed residents familiar with coastal Haiti in 1982 and 1983, and were initially disappointed with the results because we seemed to gather little information about manatees. Fishermen all over the world usually give lucid accounts of how manatee (or dugong) meat has three different consistencies or flavours (pork, fish and beef), depending on which part of the animal it is taken from. Only a very small number of people told us about this in Haiti. In reviewing our interview notes, however, we realized that there was a pattern: young people knew about manatees mostly through discussions with their parents and grandparents. People over 50 years old described first-hand experiences with manatees, including the expected meat story, and told us that manatee meat used to be sold in Haitian markets. One man had eaten manatee meat that his father had caught, some had seen dead or live animals near shore, and another man had seen a manatee while he was swimming. The best explanation for the disparity between information gathered from young versus old people is that manatees in Haiti have declined in numbers over the past 50 years, to the point where few are seen or captured.

Using information from fishermen and from the aerial survey, we plotted the distribution of optimal manatee habitat: areas characterized by shallow and sheltered water, extensive submerged vegetation, and large rivers (Figure 1). The few animals we saw during our aerial survey were either feeding in an area considered to be optimal (such as the mouth of the Riviere de l’Artibonite) or appeared to be travelling in deep, clear water from one area to another (Montrouis).

Currently, manatees are caught in beach seines, but it was our impression that this occurred only opportunistically, and that many fishermen avoided manatees because they damaged their...
nets. Traditional hunts involved two men stalking manatees from a wooden dugout canoe loaded with large stones. When they got close to an animal, they would spear it, chase it and, as the animal tired, stone it to death. Apparently, animals were butchered on the beach and no use was made of their bones.

There were frequent reports of manatees in the Bay of Jacmel in 1977 and 1978, and meat was occasionally available from fishermen. Manatee meat was seen being dried on the roofs of houses in Belle-Anse in about 1979, but we received no recent reports of manatee meat being sold.

We have no recommendations that will ensure the survival of the few manatees that remain in Haiti. There is little public concern or support for manatee conservation, and the government agency responsible for wildlife conservation is neither equipped to patrol the coast nor does it have a conservation education programme. Poverty in Haiti is substantial, and with so many people hungry it is difficult for the Government to do anything that limits potential food-producing activities.

It does not appear feasible to establish a wildlife reserve at the mouth of the Riviere de l'Artibonite, in spite of its great biological potential for manatees and birds, because of the large number of fishermen who use the area from Grande Saline and Gonaives. The best hope for manatees in Haiti is that the hunting expertise will vanish with the older generation, leaving an...
opportunity for the remaining animals to slowly re-establish their numbers. This is what appears to have happened in Belize (Charnock-Wilson, 1968), and possibly in Honduras (Rathbun et al., 1983). Most manatees that are captured in Haiti, however, appear to be accidentally caught in fishing nets, which may well be the eventual fate of the few remaining manatees. Manatees in Haiti probably cannot find any sanctuary in the adjacent Dominican Republic, where they are just as vulnerable to fishermen's activities. An education campaign aimed at fishermen might be useful, but more detailed information is needed on the attitudes of fishermen towards manatees, and consideration should be given as to whether such a campaign might have a negative effect in drawing attention to a potential resource that younger people have overlooked.

Acknowledgments

Financial, logistic and material support for the survey was provided by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Florida State Museum, the Haitian Institut de Sauvegarde du Patrimoine National (ISPAN) and the Département de l'Agriculture, Ressources Naturelles, et de Développement Rural. Paul Paryski of ISPAN was especially helpful in making and maintaining arrangements for the survey, as was Ernst Bennett of Port-au-Prince. We thank John Hermanson, John Thorbjornes, Abel Gousse and Ekke Lemke for their assistance.

References


Galen B. Rathbun, US Fish and Wildlife Service, PO Box 70, San Simeon, CA 93452-0070, USA.

Charles A. Woods, Florida State Museum, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA.

Jose A. Ottenwalder,* Museo Nacional de Historia Natural and Parque Zoológico Nacional, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

*Present address: Florida State Museum, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA.

Acronyms and abbreviations used in this issue of Oryx

AAZPA American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums
AERSG African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group
BBC British Broadcasting Corporation
CAR Central African Republic
CITES Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
CNPPA Commission on National Parks and Protected Areas
DDT Dichloro-diphenyl-trichloro-ethane
ECC European Economic Community
FAO Food and Agriculture Organization (of UN)
GLC Greater London Council
ICBP International Council for Bird Preservation
IUCN International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
NCC Nature Conservancy Council
NNR National Nature Reserve
RSPB Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SSC Species Survival Commission
UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WWF World Wildlife Fund