

**INTERACTIONS BETWEEN
DUGONGS AND SEAGRASSES
IN A
SUBTROPICAL ENVIRONMENT**

by

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Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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July, 1992

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Declaration

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Figure 1

Dedication

to

Pam Preen
John **Walters**
Margaret Thorsborne
Arthur Thorsborne

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the ecology of dugongs in **Moreton** Bay, a 1400 km² embayment in sub-tropical south-east Queensland (27.5° S, 153.3° E). The dugongs' distribution, movements, home range, habitat selection, feeding, diet and food preferences were examined in relation to the **seagrass** and physical resources. I considered the ways in which dugongs affect the seagrasses and the significance of the dugongs' role in the **seagrass** system.

Seagrasses were quantitatively mapped in two study areas, encompassing 133 km² of seagrass. Seven species of **seagrass** formed 15 **recognised** communities, which collapsed into five community-groups. Communities dominated by species of **Halophila** were the most widespread, covering 51% of the total **area** of seagrass, but they were **characterised** by low biomass, and accounted for only 9% of the total standing crop of **seagrass** (total = 12,808 tonnes dry weight). In comparison, communities dominated by **Zostera capricorni** (broad-leaf morph) occupied only 38% of the area of seagrass, but contained 75% of the **seagrass** standing crop.

The annual, **above-ground** production of **seagrass** within the study areas was estimated to be 41,728 tonnes dry weight. **Zostera capricorni**, the dominant species in terms of biomass (57.5% of total above-ground standing crop), accounted for 34% of the total, while the species of **Halophila** accounted for 36.6%, despite representing only 20.5% of above-ground standing crop.

The distinct seasonality of **Moreton** Bay was highly correlated with pronounced changes in **seagrass** abundance. There was a distinct **summer/autumn peak** in the abundance of most species. **Zostera capricorni** alone had a **winter/spring** growth period. Averaged across all species, shoot density, above-ground and below-ground biomass changed by factors of 1.9, 2.3 and 2.3, respectively, between seasons of minimum and maximum abundance.

Based on 28 aerial surveys, I estimate a **Moreton** Bay population of 600 dugongs. During spring and summer the dugongs were relatively sedentary, however, during winter the dugongs undertook regular migrations between the feeding areas inside the Bay and the oceanic waters east of the Bay (15-40 km round-trip). By riding the flood and ebb tides in and out of the Bay, the dugongs could exploit the temperature differential of up to 5° C between areas. Sometimes they spent as little as 1.5 hr, during the top of the tide, feeding in the Bay. Some dugongs stayed in the warm water outside the Bay for days at a time in winter.

Thirteen dugongs occupied an average range of 64 km² during the periods they were satellite-tracked (mean = 50 days). Within their home range, some dugongs sequentially used distinct sub-ranges, in which they concentrated their activities for periods of up to 35 days.

Some areas were rarely, if ever used by dugongs, while other areas were

persistently used. The dugongs favoured areas of low biomass, **dominated** by Halophila species. Almost all of the avoided areas were dominated by Z. capricorni. Of the 8,504 dugongs sighted on **seagrass** during aerial surveys, 76% were in areas dominated by Halophila. Likewise, 75% of locations from tracked dugongs, that were from **seagrass** habitats (n = 773), were from Halophila dominated areas. Dugongs feeding in areas dominated by Z. capricorni broad frequently grazed selectively, avoiding patches of Z. capricorni. Excluding the contribution of Z. capricorni broad, the mean biomass where dugongs were sighted and where tracking fixes occurred was 21.2 g DW/m² and 15.3 g DW/m², respectively. In comparison, communities dominated by Z. capricorni broad typically contained 100-200 g seagrass/m².

Based on the nutritional composition of the dugongs' preferred species (H. ovalis ≥ H. uninervis thin > H. spinulosa ≥ S. isoetifolium > Z. capricorni broad), it is apparent that they select primarily on the basis of high nitrogen and low fibre content. They may also select for high soluble carbohydrate content during spring, when they fed on fruiting Z. capricorni (thin-leaf morph).

Most feeding sites were in water 1.5-2.5 m deep at the time of feeding. The dugongs did not select feeding sites on the basis of sediment compaction nor mean grain size, however, they tended to avoid areas containing a high level of shell in surface sediments. In such places the dugongs adjusted their feeding technique to minimise the amount of sediment processed, by cropping primarily the leaves. This so-called **surface** grazing was also employed when the rhizome mat (usually of Z. capricorni) was particularly dense. Usually, however, the dugongs **furrow** grazed, removing shoots, rhizomes and roots.

Grazing dugongs removed 85.6% of shoots, 90.8% of above-ground biomass, 58.5% of rhizome biomass and 25.1% of root biomass from along feeding trails. Total biomass (**above-** plus below-ground) was reduced by 53.1% along feeding trails, or 65.2% excluding sites dominated by Z. capricorni.

Due to the differential digestion of **seagrass** species, the analysis of faecal samples revealed little about the dugongs' **seagrass** diet. However, it confirmed that algae are not normally eaten in significant amounts. Other evidence suggested that dugongs may actively avoid some algae (Caulerpa species, and some epiphytic species).

The faecal analysis revealed that ascidians are a significant component of the diet of dugongs in **Moreton** Bay. The stalks of the small colonial ascidian S. pulchra occurred in 69% of samples and comprised 29% of their wet weight (excluding material that passed through a 500 μm sieve). Mantles of solitary ascidians were found in 27% of samples and made up 20% of their bulk. Overall, ascidians were in 73% of samples and comprised 26% of the bulk of all samples. Comparable values for samples **analysed** from dugongs from tropical Australasia were 6.2% occurrence and 0.04% abundance. At least one dugong from **Moreton** Bay also fed on a colonial polychaete. There is little doubt that the dugongs fed selectively on the ascidians and polychaetes.

Dugongs in **Moreton** Bay often graze in large herds. Half the dugongs seen during aerial surveys were in herds of 140 or more. Grazing can reduce the abundance of **seagrass** by as much as 95% over large areas (40-75 ha). However, small tufts of **seagrass** remain as an **ungrazable** reserve (110-120 shoots/m² in a **H. ovalis** meadow), and recovery is rapid once all grazing ceases. In this regard the disturbance to **seagrass** meadows caused by grazing dugongs differs to that caused by sedimentation, water scour, disease or other die-offs.

Intensive grazing by large herds of dugongs *can* have significant effects on **seagrass** meadows. This so-called '**cultivation**' **grazing** *can* alter the species composition, age structure and nutrient status of **seagrass** meadows. Relatively high biomass, mid-seral stage communities *can* be converted to ones of low-biomass and early **seral** stage. **H. ovalis** is advantaged at the expense of **Z. capricorni** broad. This change of species results in a meadow-wide increase in nitrogen concentration and decrease in fibre levels.

Dugongs in **Moreton** Bay probably suffer particular nutritional stresses, especially during winter, due to (1) the limitation of nitrogen availability, due to seasonally low levels of nitrogen content and **seagrass** abundance and (2) the effect of cold water temperatures. They counter these winter stresses by (1) regularly migrating to an oceanic **area** outside the Bay and (2) by maximising the quality of their diet by (a) selectively feeding in communities and patches of favoured, nutritionally superior **seagrasses**, (b) by feeding on invertebrates and (c) by 'cultivation' grazing.

By concentrating their grazing in favoured regions, dugongs may alter the composition of **seagrass** communities over large areas (several km²). Grazing by dugongs is likely to be responsible for some of the spatial heterogeneity of **seagrass** communities on the eastern banks in **Moreton** Bay.

In favoured areas, dugongs may consume on the order of 28% of the **total seagrass** production. This compares with consumption levels of <3-10% of **above-ground** production only by other grazers (invertebrates, fish, waterbirds; excluding atypical populations of urchins). Previously, little attention has been paid to the role of large herbivores, such as sirenians and green turtles, in the energy flow through **seagrass** systems. Consequently, our understanding of the functioning of these systems has been based on the assumption that large herbivores do not consume a significant proportion of production, and therefore, do not play a major role in the ecology of the systems. As a result of this study, I question that assumption.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The contribution of Helene Marsh, my principal supervisor, to this study and thesis is very gratefully acknowledged. Helene was generous with support, and despite her other commitments, was always available to provide good advice. I particularly appreciated the confidence she had in me, and her forbearance. Helene attracted the great majority of outside funding for this project, with which she was munificent.

Ian Poiner, my co-supervisor at the CSIRO Marine Laboratory at Cleveland, **Moreton** Bay, was very generous with funding, advice and logistic support. I sincerely appreciate his contribution.

I also wish to thank George Heinsohn, whose quiet support I have valued for many years.

Funding for this project is gratefully acknowledged from the following sources:

- Australian Postgraduate Research Award to ARP
- Australian Research Council Grant to HM
- Queensland Department of Primary Industries
- Joint **CSIRO/JCU** Grant to IP, HM and ARP
- James **Cook** University URG and MRG grants
- Australian Geographic Society
- Consultancy funds to HM and ARP.

Several people provided crucial support to the project. I wish to thank **Bill Dall**, **Officer** in Charge of the CSIRO Cleveland Lab for allowing me to use the lab and its associated facilities for two years. Thanks also to Dawn Couchman, for being such a regular, competent and cheerful observer, and her supervisors in the Queensland Department of Primary Industries for allowing her to participate in the aerial surveys during working hours. When Dawn was unavailable, QDPI allowed Paul Luck to substitute for her.

At different times, many people provided assistance and company in the field. Foremost were Alison Osborne and Claire Peterken. Alison helped on virtually every weekend of our time in **Moreton** Bay, and Claire was available on almost a daily basis for extended periods.

Catching dugongs can be a difficult and dangerous operation, and I owe much to the people who helped. Peter Spencer and Keith Saalfeld deserve special thanks. They participated in each capture and shared the burdens of trepidation and frustration that go with the job. Other people who helped at various times were Shannon Bums, Peter Corkeron, Dawn Couchman, Mark **Hillman**, Gerry Little, Paul Luck, Helene Marsh, **Geoff** Moore, Alison Osborne, Jon Peters, John Reynolds, Rob Slade, Anne-Marie Watt and Brad **Zellar**.

Several people helped, at one time or another, with the never-ending sampling of sub-tidal **seagrasses**. I am particularly grateful to Peter Spencer, Keith Saalfeld, Claire **Peterken** and Alison Osborne. Sorting the **seagrass** samples was usually monotonous and wearisome, so I am indebted to those selfless soles who reduced

my workload. Alison Osborne and Claire **Peterken** were outstanding in this regard.

In addition to Dawn Couchman, the following people acted as left-hand observer during aerial surveys at one time or another: Paul Luck, Claire Peterken, Peter Spencer, Alison Osborne and Leah Dixon .

Galen Rathbun and Jim Reid, from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, developed the tether and housing for the satellite transmitter and provided lots of bits and pieces, as required. Their efforts are acknowledged and appreciated.

The **ascidians** and polychaetes recovered from the faeces and stomachs of dugongs were identified by Peter Arnold and **Patrica Mather**. A **skill** much appreciated.

I am grateful to a number of people for statistical advice and comment. Glenn De'ath helped with the analysis of habitat selection and the exclosure experiment; Craig Mundy was a great help with the pattern analysis; **Vicki** Nelson and Natalie **Moltschaniwskyj** let me chew their ears occasionally; and Helene Marsh was always liberal with advice, and corrected me when I got it wrong.

Several people assisted with the production of this thesis. Ali Green helped me restructure the **methods/results** of Chapter 6 and provided useful comments on parts of Chapters 1, 8 and 9. Jane Mellors commented on Chapter 4. Ian Poiner provided comments on Chapter 3. Every chapter benefited from the critical reading of Helene Marsh. Vicki Nelson carefully read the penultimate draft. To all these people I offer my heartfelt thanks.

At a personal level I wish want to thank all my friends for their warmth and support. The Dead Climbers and the Sticky-bun Club (particularly Geoff, **Vicki**, Ali, Craig, Ann-Marie, Karen and Steph) made life in Townsville a lot of fun. Special acknowledgment goes to my office-mate during much of the analysis and write-up phase, Mrs Geoffrey Moore¹, for her tolerance, **wackiness** and occasional wisdom.

Finally, very special thanks to three people. Claire Peterken, for her help and good company. **Ali** Green for putting up with me during the worst of the write-up. Alison Osborne, for her help and support, and for making the **Moreton Bay** memories so special.

¹ formerly the bodacious Anne-Marie Watt