Dugongs (Sea Cow)

Prelims: *Current events of national and international importance | Species*

Why in News?

A recent UAV-based survey by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) estimated 270 dugongs in Tamil Nadu, and the State has announced the setting up of India's first Dugong Conservation Centre.

- It is the ***largest marine herbivorous mammal.***
- **Scientific name –** *Dugong dugon.*
- **Family –** *Dugongidae.*
- **Habitat –** They are *found in calm, sheltered, nutrient-rich shallow waters*, usually within 10 metres of depth close to the shore.
- **Distribution –** Dugongs occur only in tropical and sub-tropical waters of the Indo-Pacific region, with an extensive range across 37 countries and territories from East Africa to Vanuatu.
    - **In India –** They are primarily found in the ***Gulf of Mannar, Palk Bay, Gulf of Kutch, and Andaman and Nicobar Islands.***
- **Regional extinction –** The dugongs that inhabited waters off the Odisha, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh coasts two centuries back have now become extinct.
- **Population –** Palk Bay (158 individuals) and Gulf of Mannar (112 individuals) together represent the largest viable dugong population in India.

India's first Dugong Conservation Reserve was established in September 2022 by the Tamil Nadu government in the Palk Bay region.

- **Characteristics – Size –** They can grow over 300 kg in weight and measure about 3.0–3.5 metres in length.
- **Behaviour –** They usually *live in groups limited to 5 to 7 individuals among the seagrass beds.*

- During active breeding, mother and calf are found in pairs.
- **Diet –** Each dugong consumes 30 to 4okg of seagrass a day.
- **Conservation Status**
  - **IUCN Red List –** Vulnerable
  - **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 –** Schedule I
  - **CITES –** Appendix I.
- **Threats –** Habitat degradation, destructive fishing practices, and the impacts of climate change.

References

1. The Hindu | Dugongs
2. The Hindu | India's first dugong reserve in Palk Bay

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