



PRESS RELEASE

Sri Lanka protects dugongs under Convention on Migratory Species

Abu Dhabi/Colombo, 31 January 2012 – Sri Lanka has pledged its support to the long-term survival of the dugongs and the protection of their critical seagrass habitats by becoming a signatory state to the Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of Dugongs and Their Habitats throughout their Range (Dugong MOU). The Dugong MOU operates under the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). The Secretariat to the Dugong MOU is funded and hosted by the Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi on behalf of the Government of the United Arab Emirates.

The dugong (*Dugong dugon*), often known as the ‘sea cow’, is a large, long-lived marine mammal that feeds almost exclusively on sea grass and plays a significant ecological role in the functioning of coastal ecosystems. Dugongs are found in warm coastal and island waters of over 40 countries in the Indo-Pacific. In Sri Lanka, the species is known to occur from Colombo to Jaffna, particularly in the coastal waters of Gulf of Mannar-Palk Bay region, which have sea grass beds and mangrove forests.

Although there is limited data, dugongs were reported to be both abundant and widely distributed along coastal waters of Sri Lanka up until the late in the 20th century. However over the past 30 years, dugong populations have declined dramatically and sightings are now rare in most areas of Sri Lanka. The dugong has been given high levels of legal protection in South Asia through national legislation in countries including Sri Lanka and India.

Dugongs are classified as ‘Vulnerable to Extinction’ under the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, which indicates that they face a high risk of extinction in the medium-term future. They are exposed to a number of threats across their range, including incidental capture in fishing nets, loss of habitat, boat collision and unsustainable hunting practices.

In Sri Lanka, the UNEP/CMS Office - Abu Dhabi is currently working with the Department of Wildlife Conservation, IUCN Sri Lanka and Dilmah Conservation to conduct surveys which will improve knowledge of dugong distribution, abundance, and their “hotspots” of main threats particularly from incidental captures by net fisheries. More projects are planned with the aim of facilitating national and trans-boundary action on conservation of dugongs and their habitats, enhancing regional collaboration and finding incentives to change towards more dugong-friendly practices.

Due to the size of the dugong’s range and their declining population, a coordinated international effort is crucial to the conservation of this threatened marine mammal. It is hoped that other countries in the South Asia sub-region, including Bangladesh, Maldives and Pakistan, will follow Sri Lanka’s lead to formally join the Dugong MOU.



Notes to Editors:

The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) works for the conservation of a wide array of endangered migratory animals worldwide through the negotiation and implementation of agreements and action plans. CMS, which acts under the auspices of United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), is a rapidly expanding global biodiversity convention with special expertise in the field of migratory species. At present, 116 countries are Parties to the Convention.

For more information please visit: www.cms.int

The UNEP/CMS Office - Abu Dhabi oversees the implementation of two agreements – the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Dugongs and their Habitats throughout their Range, and the MOU on African-Eurasian Migratory Birds of Prey. The Dugong MOU came into force on 31 October, 2007 and has already been signed by 20 states.

Current signatories to the UNEP/CMS Dugong MOU are: Australia, Bahrain, Comoros, Eritrea, France, India, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Myanmar, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, United Republic of Tanzania, Vanuatu, and Yemen.

*For more information on the UNEP/CMS Dugong MOU, please visit:
<http://www.cms.int/species/dugong/index.htm>*

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