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Preserving the seagrass beds that dugongs graze on is a major part of the bid to protect the mammals in the Arabian Gulf. Courtesy EAD



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Dugong habitats shrink by a quarter

[Daniel Bardsley](#)

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Scientists warn that their numbers could fall further unless Gulf countries adopt a coordinated plan to safeguard dugongs and their feeding grounds after research shows only the UAE has legal protection plan in place.

Researchers have called for stronger international efforts to protect the Arabian Gulf's dugongs after their work revealed that the areas where the creatures are found has shrunk by a quarter.

The scientists have highlighted that the UAE is the only Gulf nation to properly protect the seagrass-eating mammals, numbers of which they warned could fall further.

"It is crucial for countries in the Gulf to work together to implement a comprehensive transboundary plan," said Dalal Al Abdulrazzak, the study's lead author.

Such a plan would include habitat protection, population monitoring and efforts to reduce inadvertent catching by fishing vessels, known as bycatch.

"At present there are no regional management plan to conserve dugong populations in the Gulf. Only the UAE has protection measures in place," said MsAl Abdulrazzak.

In the journal *Zoology in the Middle East*, Ms Al Abdulrazzak and Prof Daniel Pauly, both based at Vancouver's University of British Columbia, said that their analysis of records of dugong distribution showed that dugongs were once found more widely in the Gulf than thought.

The scientists, who looked at papers dating back to the 1800s, found that dugongs once inhabited the seas off Kuwait and Iran. Dugongs recorded off Iran now are considered "vagrant".

By reconstructing past distributions, the researchers have calculated that the dugong range in the Gulf has shrunk by about 26 per cent, falling from a high of 41,236 square kilometres to 30,606 square kilometres.

This indicates that the Gulf population has shrunk more than thought.



Although the Gulf dugong population is the world's second largest, estimated at about 7,300 individuals, the researchers said the density is much lower than for dugongs in some other areas.

The study highlights threats from dredging, trawling and land reclamation, all of which damage seagrass habitats, and bycatch and oil spills.

"As we gain a better understanding of the historical trajectories for dugongs in the Gulf, the need for improved management becomes clearer," said the authors.

The researchers stated that "dugongs in the Gulf are only offered protection in the waters of the United Arab Emirates", this coming from a federal law and an Emiri decree.

Lance Morgan, president and chief executive of the US-based Marine Conservation Institute, agreed that Gulf countries should work together to protect the mammal.

"For dugong populations to recover, it is crucially important that governments cooperate on regional plans for their conservation and management and to protect seagrass beds," he said.

A memorandum of understanding on the conservation and management of dugongs and their habitats was launched in Abu Dhabi in 2007 and is managed by the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) office in Abu Dhabi.

Among states bordering the Gulf, only the UAE and Saudi Arabia are signatories.

"It is very likely that the Gulf states share the same population of dugongs, so it is critical that all the Gulf range states (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE) cooperate to protect dugongs and their seagrass meadows. The CMS dugong memorandum can help this cooperation," said Donna Kwan, CMS programme officer for dugongs.

She said one of the biggest challenges was not to enforce legal protection of dugongs but to identify why they are still at risk and find ways to reduce threats.

"We would absolutely encourage Gulf states to join the memorandum and commit to cooperate closely to protect dugongs and provide the necessary resources to make that work a success," said Matthew Collis, acting director for international environmental agreements at the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

For the dugong study, the researchers found 155 records, many in libraries overseas, although records also came from the UAE, including data collected by the Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature classes dugongs as "vulnerable" and estimates that, over the past 60 years, their numbers have fallen globally by 30 per cent.

Last month, 23 of the 40 countries with dugongs met in Abu Dhabi to discuss ways to protect them. Abu Dhabi also hosts the headquarters for the Dugong and Seagrass Conservation project, an international effort to preserve dugongs and their habitats linked to the Mohammed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund.

Link: <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/dugong-habitats-shrink-by-a-quarter>