

Love Those Manatees!

Manatees may not be beauties, but they sure are cuties.

Like all manatees, this mom and calf are happiest living life in the slow lane.

BY KATHY KRANKING

If there were a contest for Most Roly-Poly Animal, manatees would win—flippers down! These big, blimpy mammals look like giant stuffed animals, paddling slowly through the water. You might be roly-poly, too, if you lived the life of a manatee. For one thing, manatees spend much of their time sleeping—especially during the winter. They take lots of short naps both day and night, floating near the water's surface or lying on the bottom. Manatees have to come to the surface to breathe air, even when they're snoozing. But they seem to be able to do it automatically, without fully waking up.



Manatees are built for life underwater. They can close their nostrils to keep water out (left). And their strong flippers help with swimming, as well as holding on to a meal! (below left)

the warm coastal waters and rivers of Florida, but also in other coastal states, as well as in Central and South America. Manatees are sometimes called “sea cows,” but they aren’t cows at all. Though they look like they might be related to seals or walruses, they are actually more closely related to elephants.

Mom and Me

Mother manatees usually raise just one calf at a time. A calf is able to swim within minutes of being born. It stays with its mom for up to two years. When the calf is a few weeks old, it begins munching on water plants: veggies to go with Mom’s milk.

A manatee calf stays close to its mom, slurping up rich, warm milk from a nipple behind either flipper (below).

HERB SEGARS/ANIMALS ANIMALS (8T); DOUGLAS FAULKNER/PHOTO RESEARCHERS, INC. (8B); STEPHEN FRINK (8-9)



Munching Manatees

When manatees aren’t sleeping, they’re usually busy doing their other favorite thing: eating! Manatees are the only water mammals that eat just plants. And they eat a lot: more than 100 pounds each day!

A full-grown manatee can weigh about as much as a horse.

But even though it has such a big, bulky body, it’s a graceful swimmer. A manatee usually swims at a speed of about 3 to 5 miles per hour (mph). But it can move as fast as 15 mph for a short time, if it has to.

The manatees found in the United States are *West Indian manatees*. They live mostly in



Manatees are often curious and playful. The one at left has found a rope to tug on. And the one below may be hoping for a belly scratch from a diver.

Gentle Giants

Manatees are peaceful, friendly animals. They nuzzle each other's noses, "hug" each other with their flippers, and greet each other with what look like kisses. Manatees even "talk" to each other with squeaks, chirps, or squeals.

These gentle animals have no natural enemies. But people have given them lots of trouble,



Sadly, many of Florida's manatees have boat-propeller scars on their backs (below). But in areas where manatees gather, boaters are required to drive slowly (left).



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and now manatees are endangered. They get hit by speeding motor boats, caught in canal gates, and tangled in fishing lines and nets.

The Good News

People are working to help manatees. For instance, they have made some of the areas where manatees gather into *sanctuaries*, or protected places. No one is allowed to boat, swim, or dive there. In other areas, boaters must follow strict speed limits, and swimmers aren't allowed to

chase after the manatees.

But that doesn't mean that people and manatees don't mix peacefully! Each year, thousands of people come to Florida to see them. And most manatees are curious about people. They'll often come right up to swimmers. They may even nuzzle them with their whiskery lips or turn over for a belly rub!

People love manatees and want to help them. With some luck, these roly-poly animals will be making their slow way through our waters for years to come. 🐬

For more information, go to <http://www.savethemanatee.org/coolstuff.htm>