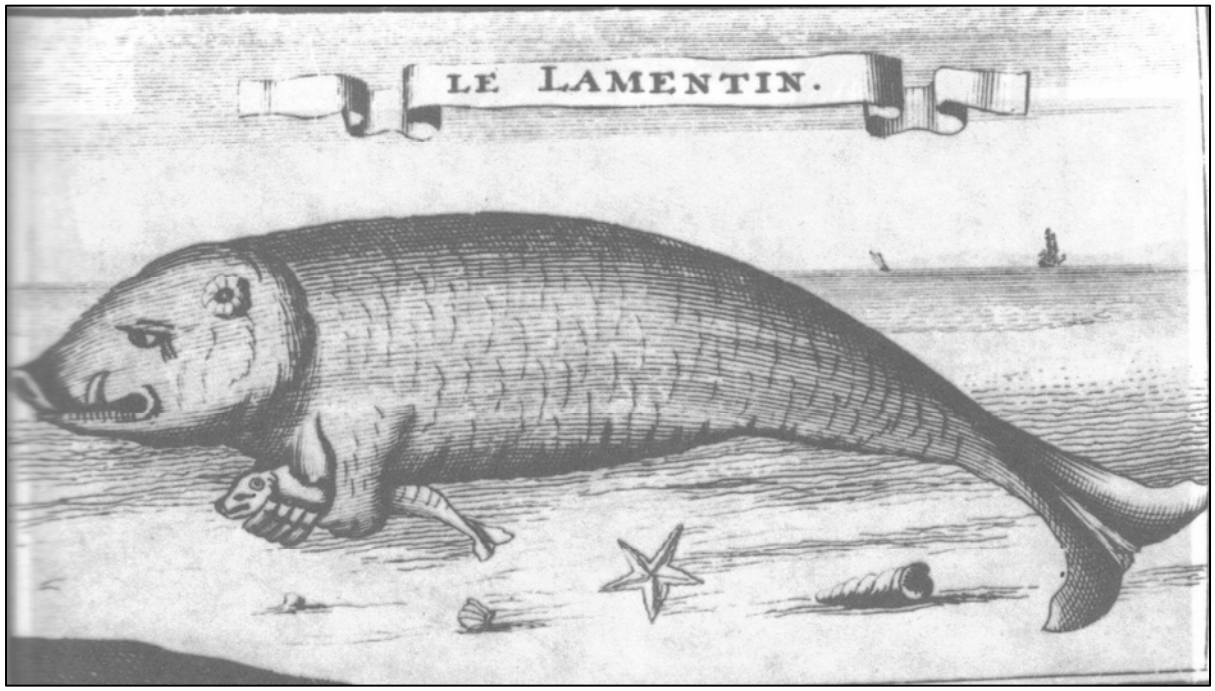
WWF Eastern African Marine Ecoregion. 2004. Towards a Western Indian Ocean Dugong Conservation Strategy: The status of Dugongs in the Western Indian Ocean Region and Priority Conservation Actions. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania : WWF. 68pp.

Has the dugong gone the way of the Dodo? Mauritius is an island nation of volcanic origin that forms part of the Mascarene Islands and is situated approximately 900km east of Madagascar in the West Indian Ocean. Historical documents suggest that dugongs were once prevalent in this area and the earliest report of their occurrence was noted by Captain Cornelius Matelief in 1606 (in Stoddart, 1971). Seventeenth century reports illustrate the abundance of the species at the time, describing huge herds that were freely harvested (Leguat, 1708). Descriptions in the 18th century generally detail a reduction in numbers, although the species was still fairly numerous at Rodrigues; there are no further references from the 19th century onwards. However, this is also the case for many other islands where dugong populations persist in the 21st century in small numbers. Marine biology is a relatively new field which only emerged as a recognized discipline in the 20th century, and consequently, exploratory zoological expeditions and their associated literature focused predominantly on terrestrial fauna. The colonial administrations of Mauritius were uninterested in conducting research into marine fauna, a potential explanation of the absence of written material on dugongs since the 1800s.



An artist's impression of Leguat's description of the dugong

The IUCN Red List states that the dugong is questionably extinct in Mauritius. However, the species is considered declining or of an unknown status in much of its range and the little information available is based predominantly on anecdotal evidence. Opportunistic sightings have led to the discovery of dugongs in areas where they had been previously declared extinct, such as the discovery of two individuals at Aldabra Atoll, Seychelles in 2001 (Marsh et al., 2002), which was followed in 2003 by the sighting of a juvenile. The species was thought to be extinct in the locality since the early 20th century and its reappearance alludes to the animal's ability to undertake large-scale migration within its range because the atoll is at least 300km from the nearest extant populations of the Comoros and Madagascar. Further evidence of long-distance migration was provided in 2002 when a dugong arrived at the Cocos (Keeling) Islands which are separated from the nearest shallow water coastal habitat (Java,

Indonesia to the northeast) by 1000km and depths of up to 4000m (Hobbs et al., 2007). This has been acknowledged as the longest recorded dugong movement and is again indicative of this species' capacity for long distance oceanic movements to colonize new locations.

Given that historical records indicate that thousands of dugongs were once present around the islands of Mauritius and Rodrigues (600km east of Mauritius), in combination with the species' ability to undertake large-scale migrations, there is a chance that they still exist in Mauritius in small numbers or, following local extinction, have immigrated from neighbouring Madagascar. Indeed, an unconfirmed sighting in 1999 by the late marine mammalogist, Delphine Legay, further supports the possibility of dugongs in Mauritian waters and the need for further studies.

An investigation to confirm or contest the species' extinction in Mauritius will be implemented in Mauritius by Community Centred Conservation (C3) in collaboration with the Ministry of Agro Industry and Fisheries (Fisheries Division). Fishers from the islands of Mauritius and Rodrigues will be invited to meetings at which presentations will be given about the dugong, its endangered status throughout the western Indian Ocean, threats, and conservation priorities, providing an opportunity to increase awareness to encourage reporting of dugong sightings in the future. Anecdotal information will be gathered from fishers who have seen dugongs or who have heard historical accounts from their predecessors. Copies of sighting cards will be distributed to fishers' associations, marine research institutions and dive operators throughout the islands to record historical accounts or future sightings. In addition, crew of vessels and pilots operating in Mauritian waters will be approached, informed and questioned about dugongs.

C3 has conducted research into dugongs in the western Pacific (Palau) and western Indian Ocean (Comoros) using aerial surveys, seagrass mapping, long-term incidental sighting programmes and semi-structured fisher interviews. A number of relevant publications are available for download from http://www.c-3.org.uk/English/General/ reports.htm. -**Gary Haskins** and **Patricia Davis** (Community Centred Conservation (C3), www.c-3.org.uk, info@c-3.org.uk)

References

Hobbs, J-P.A., A.J. Frisch, J. Hender, and J.J. Gilligan. 2007. Long-Distance Oceanic Movement of a Solitary Dugong (*Dugong dugon*) to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. *Aquatic Mammals* 33:175-178.

Leguat, F. 1708 Voyage et Avantures de François Leguat, & de ses Compagnons, en deux Isles desertes des Indes Orientales. Avec la Rélation des choses les plus remarquables qu'ils ont observées dans l'Isle Maurice, â Batavia, au Cap de Bonne-Espérance, dans l'Isle St. Heléne, & en d'autres endroits de leur Route. David Mortier, London. Vol 1:164pp. Vol 2:180pp.

Marsh, H., H. Penrose, C. Eros and J. Hugues. 2002. Dugong: Status Report and Action Plans for Countries and Territories. In: I.S.S.S. Group, Editor, *UNEP: Early Warning and Assessment Report Series*, *Townsville*. 162pp.

Stoddart D.R. 1971. Pinnipeds or sirenians at western Indian Ocean islands. *Journal of Zoology* 167:207-217.

GHANA

Capacity Building Program to Benefit West African Manatees. The West African Manatee Project in Ghana is specifically focused on improving the conservation status of West African manatees through research, community conservation, and capacity building. In collaboration with Nature Conservation and Research Centre (NCRC), the University of Ghana (UG), Sirenian International (SI), Wildlife Trust (WT), and the Sirenia