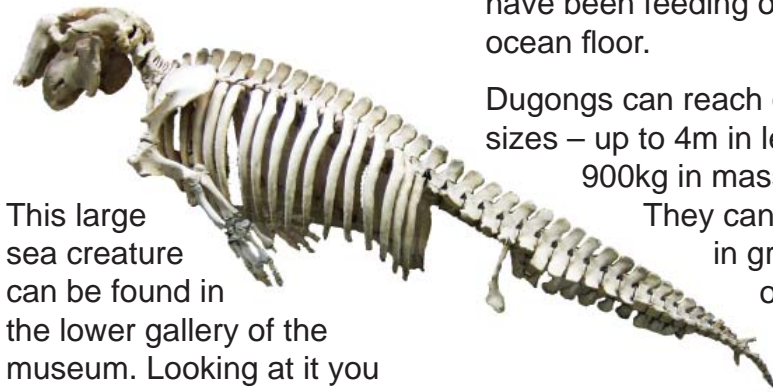


YZC Animal of the Month, March 2012

Dugong

Dugong dugon



This large sea creature can be found in the lower gallery of the museum. Looking at it you might think it is related to seals or dolphins, but it is actually more closely related to elephants. That's right – Dugongs and Manatees (the group of mammals called the Sirenia) belong in the same group as Elephants and small animals called Hyraxes. The streamlined shape, flipper-like limbs and tail are adaptations for living in the sea.

Dugongs mainly eat sea grasses in shallow tropical waters. They uproot their food by using their flexible upper lip and the tough pads on the lower lip and palate to grasp plants at their base and pull them up. Dugongs leave characteristic trails where they

have been feeding on the ocean floor.

Dugongs can reach quite large sizes – up to 4m in length and 900kg in mass.

They can be found in groups or on their own.

They are thought to live for up to around 70 years in the wild. Their natural predators are sharks. Dugongs are found in warm, coastal waters of East Africa down to Australia. Its relatives, Manatees, are found around the Caribbean, the Amazon Basin and in West Africa. Dugong survival has been put under stress by people hunting them for their meat, hide, ivory and oils. They are quite slow and feed in shallow, coastal waters making them an easy target. They are now protected by law. The Dugong's closest relative, Steller's Sea Cow, was hunted to extinction in the 18th century. Let's hope this doesn't happen to these wonderful herbivores of the sea.