Danger: Manatees at Play

The subject of manatees takes us far back in the history of both natural science and imaginative storytelling. Manatees have been in existence for fifty million years. This sea animal was probably what sailors were seeing long ago when they reported visions of mermaids sunning themselves on rocks far in the distance.

Closer observation of the manatee shows it to be a ponderous mammal. It measures from eight to twelve feet in length and weighs up to 3,000 pounds. The manatee’s tapered body, shaped somewhat like that of an overgrown seal or miniature whale, has two front legs and a broad flat tail. The legs and the tail all act as flippers.

Manatees live singly or in small groups. They can eat 200 pounds of food a day, grazing contentedly on water hyacinths and other aquatic plants. A manatee sometimes may stand up straight in the water, often with strings of sea plants hanging like hair from its head.

In the United States, Florida’s coastal waters are the manatee’s principal habitat. These sea creatures are quite docile by nature. In fact, they have no fear of humans; they seem to love company! Manatees allow swimmers to play alongside them, something that is discouraged by game wardens.

Florida authorities monitor the manatee population carefully. A 2009 aerial survey showed that more than 2,000 manatees inhabit the area’s waters. Manatees were once hunted for their hides and their meat. However, they have been protected by law from this practice for more than a century. Still, the alarming reality is that the manatee population has dwindled considerably in recent years. Sadly, this lovable creature, which has survived all these years without threats from predators, may now be on the verge of extinction. The main reason for this is related to the enormous increase in the number of powerboats in Florida.

Manatees feed just below the surface. They are often unobserved by speeding boaters who may go blithely on their way, ignorant of the terrible injuries they have just inflicted. Being struck by a high-speed propeller can be lethal; almost a third of all manatee deaths are boat-related, and the number is growing. Wildlife wardens estimate that ninety percent of all adult manatees have been mutilated by the propellers of speeding boats. The reasons for
this are not entirely clear—perhaps the manatees have poor hearing and are unaware of a boat’s approach. Perhaps they are simply not nimble enough to get out of the way in time.

In recent years, people have become more aware of the plight of the manatee. Laws such as the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act prohibit harming manatees. More needs to be done, though. People operating power boats in areas where manatees live need to be more vigilant. If they were, many collisions could be averted. And speed limits need to be strictly enforced, even though people whose livelihood depends on the boating industry assert that too much regulation would cause economic hardship. One thing is certain: if speedboats continue to operate as they have in the past, the ancient manatee's prospects of survival are bleak.

Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson’s word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. What behavior of manatees could have made sailors mistakenly assert that they had seen a mermaid?

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2. What kind of plant is a water hyacinth?

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3. Is the nature of the manatee similar to that of a predator?

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4. Is the manatee population increasing or decreasing?

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5. Have many manatees have been injured as a result of collisions with boats?

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6. Can a manatee die as a result of being struck by the propeller of a boat?

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7. Why do many boaters go **blithely** on their way after striking a manatee?

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8. What could boat owners do to protect the manatee population?

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9. What is the meaning of **averted** as it is used in the passage?

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10. How do we keep track of the manatee population?

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11. Why would manatees be described as **ponderous**?

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12. What is the meaning of **nimble** as it is used in the passage?

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13. Why should we be concerned about the manatee?

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14. What is the meaning of **bleak** as it is used in the passage?

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15. Are people indifferent to the manatees’ **plight**?

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The Latin word for water is *aqua* and forms the root of the adjective *aquatic*. Other words formed from this root include nouns such as *aquarium* and *aqueduct*, “a large pipe or channel for water.” You might guess that the word *aquiline* comes from the same Latin root. Actually, it comes from a different Latin word altogether, *aquila*, which means “eagle.” An *aquiline* nose is one that is curved like an eagle’s beak.

The ancient Greeks believed that the dead went to the underworld, where they bathed in the river Lethe, which caused them to forget their earthly lives. The Latin word *letum*, “death,” comes from the name of the river and forms the English adjective *lethal*, “capable of causing death” (a *lethal* injection; a *lethal* weapon).

Several words come from the Latin *vigilare*, “to be watchful.” In addition to *vigilant*, there is *vigil*, a watch kept during normal hours of sleep (Parents keep a *vigil* by the bedside of a very sick child) and *vigilante*, a person who takes the law into her or his own hands, usually as part of a group.

The noun *plight* carries with it a reminder of love and marriage in centuries past. Once it was a verb and meant “to promise; to pledge.” When persons got engaged to be married, they “plighted their troth.” This means they would dishonor themselves if they were not faithful and true to each other. *Troth* is a word that has disappeared entirely from the language. Once it meant “loyalty; faithfulness; honor.”