



Name: _____

Mermaids in the Everglades Comprehension Questions

Mermaid myths have been around for ages, with explorers even reporting they had seen mermaids along their voyages. However, it is much more likely they saw manatees floating along the currents with their fish like tails instead. Here in the Everglades, we have our very own mermaid-like creature: the Florida manatee.

There is no scientific evidence for aquatic humanoids, or for that matter, centaurs, or satyrs. Good thing we have manatees to enchant us instead.

Directions: Learn more about the manatees, gentle giants of the Everglades, by reading *Mermaids in the Everglades* ([attached below](#)), and answering the reading comprehension questions ([attached below](#)).

Everglades Literacy Lesson Connection:

Grade 4 Lesson 2: Wanted Alive!

<https://www.evergladesliteracy.org/fourth-grade>

Students will read a book titled *Everglades*, by Jean Craighead George. They will research a threatened or endangered animal species and create a poster of their findings.

- THE LATEST SCIENCE BRIEF -

MERMAIDS IN THE EVERGLADES

WRITTEN BY DR. RUSCENA WIEDERHOLT

"IF ANYONE UNWARILY DRAWS IN TOO CLOSE AND HEARS THE SINGING OF THE SIRENS, HIS WIFE AND CHILDREN WILL NEVER WELCOME HIM HOME AGAIN, FOR THEY SIT IN A GREEN FIELD AND WARBLE HIM TO DEATH WITH THE SWEETNESS OF THEIR SONG."

-HOMER, *THE ODYSSEY*



Mermaid myths were so prominent in the past that the actual beings occasionally materialized from the foamy depths of their aquatic homes. For instance, in 1493, Christopher Columbus described them in the Caribbean as “not half as beautiful as they are painted.” In the early 1600s, John Smith (the purported love interest of Pocahontas) claimed to have seen a graceful one swimming in the West Indies. It’s likely they did see something with a fish-like tail, but much less provocative than the fairy tales would suggest: manatees. In the sunshine state, we have our very own mermaid-like creature: the Florida manatee. A subspecies of West Indian manatees, their taxonomic order is aptly named Sirenia. Enjoy our lighthearted take on how the real beast differs from the fable.

MANATEES ARE JUST A LITTLE BIT BIGGER

It’s hard to imagine confusing a manatee with a woman but then again, I’ve never been at sea for months on end without fresh food or basic comforts. To give these sailors credit, manatees do have large, spatula-shaped tails but that’s where the likeness to the willowy mermaid ends. Portly and wrinkle-faced, manatees can be 10 feet long and weigh from 800 to 1200 pounds. Even their babies are huge, weighing up to 70 pounds at birth. Sparse hairs, which improve their sense of touch, cover their body along with barnacles and patches of algae. Despite these hefty differences, mermaid sightings are not a thing of the past. As recently as 2009, so many mermaid sightings were reported in a coastal Israeli town that the city council offered a reward of \$1 million for the first successful mermaid photograph.

MANATEES HAVE A MORE LIMITED RANGE THAN MERMAIDS

For starters, the three species of manatees are found in coastal and riverine areas in the Americas and western Africa. The dugong, a closely related species, ranges from the western Pacific Ocean to the east coast of Africa. The Florida manatee spends their winters here in Florida to keep warm, but can move as far away as Texas or Massachusetts when nearshore waters heat up in summer. In contrast, mermaids have seeped into cultures across the globe, with stories of fiendish aquatic humanoids emerging from both inland and seaside locations. Similarly, manatees, with their versatile habitat preferences, are found in marine, estuarine, and freshwater ecosystems.

MERMAIDS HAVE A MUCH NASTIER DISPOSITION

Mermaid folklore runs the gamut from cold-blooded murderers and capricious goddesses to munificent gift bearers and marriage material. Manatees, on the other hand, are always gentle, docile, and unhurried creatures. It’s believed they don’t have any natural predators besides humans, which might explain their peaceful nature. Not portents of doom for any creature, manatees are actually vegetarian. Nicknamed sea cows, they eat seagrass and other aquatic plants, and lots of it, up to 100 pounds daily. Much like mermaids, manatees have a captivating and magnetic presence, and both tourists and residents flock to see them across our state.

MANATEE POPULATIONS ARE RECOVERING WHILE MERMAID POPULATIONS APPEAR TO BE STABLE

Manatees have had a more tumultuous, though less sensational, past than mermaids. West Indian manatees were first listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1967, when only a few hundred remained in the wild. Hunting had reduced their population size significantly; fortunately, this is now banned in the U.S. and many other countries. Today, collisions with boats are one of the leading causes of mortality. Habitat loss from coastal development, water diversions, pollution, diseases, natural disasters, and red tide also threaten their populations. For instance, the toxic red tides off of Florida's gulf coast in 2013 and 2018 resulted in several hundred manatee deaths. Despite these threats, manatee populations in Florida have increased over the past 25 years from less than 1,300 to over 8,800 individuals today. Because of their recovery, in 2017, manatees were downlisted from endangered to threatened.

Their legendary counterparts, on the other hand, have been widely popular since ancient times. Mermaid iconography and tales are alive and well today, adorning countless seaside shops, luring you to a ubiquitous cafe, and materializing in numerous films. Surprisingly, a token of belief has managed to survive all these centuries. In 2013, Animal Planet somewhat incongruously launched a special on mermaids. Afterwards, so many people called the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) asking if merfolk were real that their website now has its very own mermaid page. It reminds everyone that there is no scientific evidence for aquatic humanoids, or for that matter, minotaurs, centaurs, or satyrs. Good thing we have manatees to enchant us instead.

MANATEE VIEWING: THE FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION HAS AN EXTENSIVE LIST OF PLACES TO SEE MANATEES [>>>CLICK HERE<<](#)

Mermaids in the Everglades Comprehension Questions

1. How many species of manatees are there in the world?
 - a. 2
 - b. 3
 - c. 5
 - d. 10

2. True/False (Choose one)- Manatees have versatile habitat preferences, and may be found in marine, estuarine, and freshwater ecosystems.

3. On average, how long (in feet) and how heavy (in pounds) can manatees get?

4. How much do manatee babies weigh (in pounds) at birth?

5. List 3 differences between manatees and mermaids in how they are depicted.

6. **True/False** (Choose one)- Manatees have natural predators besides humans.

7. What does a manatee's main diet consist of?
 - a. Vegetation
 - b. Algae
 - c. Fish
 - d. Jellyfish

8. About how many pounds of food per day do manatees eat?
 - a. 25
 - b. 150
 - c. 100
 - d. 50



Name: _____

9. West Indian manatees were first listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in which year?
- a. 1966
 - b. 1980
 - c. 1977
 - d. 1967

10. What are some threats to manatees? What are some ways we can help manatees?

Mermaids in the Everglades Comprehension Questions - Answer Key

1. How many species of manatees are there in the world?
 - a. 2
 - b. 3**
 - c. 5
 - d. 10

2. **True**/False (Choose one)- Manatees have versatile habitat preferences, and may be found in marine, estuarine, and freshwater ecosystems.

3. On average, how long (in feet) and how heavy (in pounds) can manatees get?
Manatees can be 10 feet long and weigh from 800 to 1200 pounds.

4. How much do manatee babies weigh at birth?
Approximately 70 pounds.

5. List 3 differences between manatees and mermaids in how they are depicted.
Mermaids are depicted as murderers and mischievous goddesses whereas manatees in real life are very docile and slow moving gentle giants, aka sea cows. Mermaids are seen as beautiful women and manatees are wrinkly, large sea mammals. Manatees are found in coastal and riverine areas in the Americas and western Africa, where mermaids are represented in different cultures all around the world.

6. True/**False** (Choose one)- Manatees have natural predators besides humans.

7. What does a manatee's main diet consist of?
 - a. Vegetation**
 - b. Algae
 - c. Fish
 - d. Jellyfish



Name: _____

8. About how many pounds of food per day do manatees eat?

- e. 25
- f. 150
- g. 100**
- h. 50

9. West Indian manatees were first listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in which year?

- a. 1966
- b. 1980
- c. 1977
- d. 1967**

10. What are some threats to manatees? What are some ways we can help manatees?

Collisions with boats are one of the leading causes of mortality. Habitat loss from coastal development, water diversions, pollution, diseases, natural disasters, and red tide also threaten their populations. We can help manatees by abiding by water speed limits when riding on watercraft, as well as recycling fishing lines and other plastics, and making sure to never feed, give water, or touch manatees in the wild. We can also stay informed, spread awareness, and advocate for Everglades restoration.