

By: Jody A. Thompson, Environmental Educator
Alabama Sea Grant/Auburn Marine Center

A rare visitor to the Alabama coast, the West Indian manatee is a large in-shore marine mammal that typically grows to 9 or 10 feet in length and can weigh 1000 pounds or more. They prefer warmer waters, and their habitat is limited to the Caribbean, Florida and southern Georgia, though they have been sighted as far north as the Carolinas, and as far west as Texas. Manatees are herbivores, meaning they feed on the aquatic vegetation found mostly in shallow waters. Because this is also the favored habitat of many boaters, manatees are in danger from encounters with boat propellers.

This gentle, endangered species is studied carefully so scientists can learn more about their habits and population size. Sightings of manatees have become more frequent in Alabama over recent years. In order to better quantify these sightings and gain insight to their more frequent appearances, scientists at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab have created the Mobile Bay Manatee Sighting Network. You may report a manatee sighting 24 hours a day by email to manatee@disl.org, or by calling 1-866-493-5803. You are asked to report as much of the following information as you can:

- Date and time of sighting in military time
- Location of sighting with as much detail as possible, including an associated street address, river name, and, if possible GPS coordinates
- Name and phone number or e-mail address of reporting party
- Number of animals and approximate size
- Any distinguishing marks, scars (manatees can be identified by scarring patterns)
- What they were doing (swimming, floating, foraging)
- How they were spotted (from boat, dock, etc.)
- A photograph, if one was taken

Keep in mind that harassing a federally endangered animal is a crime. This includes any action on your part that causes them to alter their natural behavior, scares them, or causes them to stop feeding. If you see a manatee, please keep at least 100 feet of distance. You can find out more details about the Manatee Watch program at www.manatee.disl.org.