

REVIEW OF THE STATUS OF MANATEE (*Trichechus manatus*) IN HONDURAS, CENTRAL AMERICA

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RESUMEN

Se recopiló información sobre el estado del manatí (*Trichechus manatus*) en Honduras, Centro América a través de entrevistas con los habitantes locales, inspectores de vida silvestre y observaciones de campo.

El manatí está protegido por la ley en Honduras, ya sea la cacería o persecución de cualquier forma. Sin embargo, siguen cazándolo pero a un nivel reducido. Este animal se ha reducido especialmente a lo largo de la costa atlántica donde se encuentran densidades altas de población humana y hay pocas lagunas costeras. Las lagunas costeras de la Mosquitia mantienen probablemente las poblaciones más altas que se encuentran en el país. Se observaron tres individuos en la Laguna Siksa y uno en la de Tilbalaca de esta misma área.

DESARROLLO

In the present decade, the decrease in the population of the manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) has become an ever increasing world concern. Bertram (1974) in his paper on the conservation of the Sirenia states that "All these animals (weighing several hundred kilograms each) have been extensively hunted for their meat and are now represented by relict populations with large intervening areas of their original ranges where the animals are now virtually extinct." In discussing the Caribbean manatee he goes on to state that apart from Belize there is a regrettable shortage of information from

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Central American countries apart from odd records of continuing presence.

The most recent information regarding *T. manatus* is that given by Husar (1977) which summarizes the existing.

Knowledge concerning the life history and distribution of this species. She details the known distributional data available for Central America and states that they were reported as plentiful in the late 19th century in both Nicaragua and Honduras. However, she goes on to state that recent information on the status of the manatee in Honduras is not available.

This paper presents an updated evaluation of the manatee situation in Honduras. It is based on interviews of local inhabitants of the area, information provided by wildlife inspectors and personal observations by the author while conducting other research projects as wildlife advisor to the Honduran Government.

The author does not contend that this paper represents a complete or thorough analysis of the manatee situation in Honduras but rather it is an attempt to document the present knowledge available regarding a species which is ever steadily decreasing in its abundance and distribution and of which there exists such an incredible paucity of information.

LEGISLATION

At present, the manatee receives complete protection under Honduran law. According to Article 49 of the Fisheries Law (Decree No.154), passed in 1959, it is prohibited to give chase, wound, harpoon, capture or trap a manatee. The introduction of any products derived from the manatee to national territory is also prohibited. The fine for failure to comply with these regulations is US\$ 150 or 300 days in jail.

The Direction of Renewable Natural Resources has revised the existing fisheries law and if adopted, the manatee would continue to be completely protected. Infractions of the law, however, would be raised to a minimum of US\$ 2500 and a maximum of US\$ 50,000.

DISTRIBUTION AND STATUS

Mosquitia

The area commonly known as the Mosquitia is a large expanse of land in the eastern portion of Honduras. It maintains a relatively low indigenous population and extensive tracts of virgin unsettled lands. Near the coast are extensive coastal and freshwater lagoons. The author visited this area in 1976 and 1977, during which time he questioned the local inhabitants regarding past and present abundance, harvest methods and present hunting pressure on the manatee.

In the area between Palacios and Laguna de Brus it was reported that the manatee was at one time very abundant and had supplied much of the meat for the smaller villages of the area. Today, however, it has not been recently sighted in the area of Palacios. The villagers attribute this to the increase in the number of motorized dugout canoes and not to overhunting. In Laguna de Brus and Laguna Ibans they are reported as being only occasionally observed. One local fisherman of Laguna Ibans did report, however, that on one occasion in 1975 he observed 8 or 9 individuals in the southwestern end of this lagoon. The largest concentrations of manatee were reported to be in Laguna Rapa, a small inland lagoon to the west of the Río Patuca. Again, this was attributed to the increase of motorized modes of travel and not to overhunting.

The lagoons to the East of Laguna de Brus were visited in 1977 while conducting a month long crocodile survey. Here also, the population of manatees was reported as having decreased from its former abundance, though it is still frequently observed. Villagers of Auratá reported the manatee to be observed frequently in Laguna Guarunta and Laguna Biltamaira, and occasionally found in Laguna Tilbalaca. On the 25th of February, while returning from a night count of crocodiles in Laguna tilbalaca, what appeared to be a manatee "porpoising" was observed in the entrance to this lagoon. The distance, however, was too great to make a positive identification. On the 5th of March, three individuals were observed and positively identified in the Laguna Siksa, a small lagoon bordering Laguna Biltamaira to the North.

The local fisherman which served as guides reported finding the remains of a manatee in Laguna Tansin during December of 1976 and having observed a single manatee in January of 1977 in Laguna Caratasca.

OTHER AREAS OF HONDURAS

Recent data regarding other areas of Honduras in extremely scarce. sightings of manatees at the mouth of Río Chamelecón, near Puerto Cortés, were reported to the author in 1976 by the wildlife inspector from that area. A single manatee was reported harvested in 1976 and another one in 1977 in the Río Cangrejal near La Ceiba by the wildlife inspector there. The local inhabitants of these areas when questioned by the author, stated that though at one time this species was common in the areas where large rivers empty into the ocean, they are now rarely encountered.

In early literature manatees were reported as occurring on the Bay Islands (Strong, 1935) but Davidson (1974) reports that they are no longer found in that area.

HUNTING

As was pointed out in the section on legislation, it is illegal to harvest manatees in Honduran waters. Hunting however still occurs, though probably at a much lower scale. The author was informed that prior to his arrival in 1977, meat from a manatee that had been harvested in the first week of February was being sold in Puerto Lempira.

At the time the author visited the village of Aurata, he questioned the degree of retirement that exists within the village with regards to manatee hunting as several harpoons and bouys of the type commonly used to hunt these animals were seen. While discussing manatees with the people of the area it was obvious that the majority were fully informed as to the existing prohibition on manatee hunting, however the reasoning behind such protective measures were not understood. Since there is almost a complete lack of an effective enforcement program the people continue to view the manatee as a source of meat and when occasion presents itself eagerly harvest them.

The present methods utilized in hunting are still rudimentary in form. They are hunted from paddled dugout canoes with locally fashioned harpoons. The harpoon consists of a metal head attached to a wooden pole. The head is most commonly fashioned from an old metal file which is flattened and then sharpened with barbs cut into the edge. This is then inserted into a straight wooden pole, usually some three meters in length. A bouy is attached to the head by means of small diameter rope some 20 feet in length. Several of these harpoons are then taken on the hunt.

The hunting team usually consist of two people, a harpooner and a paddler. Hunting is most commonly undertaken in areas where manatees are known to feed. Once a manatee is sighted the hunting team carefully approaches and if the animal submerges they wait until it reemerges and then the first harpoon is driven home. From this point onward, the manatee is followed by means of the bouy, with the hunters trying to maintain a position from which the animal can be harpooned again when it surfaces to breathe. This is continued until the animal surfaces from exahustion at which time it is delivered the fatal blow.

CONCLUSIONS

the populations of manatee in Honduras, as elsewhere in the world, have notably declined from their previous numbers, especially in those areas of the coast where few lagoons are encountered (making the animals more dependent on river mouths) and where human population densities are high. In the Mosquitia, though not overly abundant, their populations appear to be in better shape, particularly in the eastern lagoons. This area provides the largest area of habitat for the manatee to be encountered in Honduras and is also the least populated by humans.

Though protected by law, its enforcement has proven difficult because of lack of personnel and in the case of the Mosquitia, the large expanse of remote areas of difficult access. Because of this, a need for a massive public campaign is evident, to inform the general public of the reasons behind the conservation/protection programs adopted by the government. In this manner it would be hoped that the objectives of such programs could be achieved through public conviction rather than by imposition.

Honduras presently has a project underway to identify potential areas for inclusion into a wildlands system (Helle and Glick, 1976), in which the coastal lagoons of the Mosquitia are to be considered. The establishment of part or all of this area in the wildlands system would aid in the conservation of this species. Even so, the need for a thorough survey of the Atlantic coast to determine the numerical abundance of this species is obvious.

SUMMARY

Information was gathered on the status of the manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) in Honduras Central America through interviews of local inhabitants and wildlife inspectors and field observations.

The manatee is protected by Honduran law from any from of hunting or persecution. Hunting, however, still takes place though at a reduced level. The manatee has decreases from its former abundance, especially along those coastal areas where human population densities are high and few coastal lagoons are found. The coastal lagoons of the Mosquitia probably maintain the highest populations to be found anywhere in the country. Three confirmed sightings and one possible sighting were made in the Laguna Siksa and Laguna Tilbalaca respectively, of this area.

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