

## Dugong population in decline on southern Great Barrier Reef, report finds

ABC Wide Bay

By Pat Heagney and Lily Nothling

Posted 28/09/2023



Photo Supplied: Artemis Media)

Dugong numbers are falling in coastal areas along the Great Barrier Reef and researchers warn floods and fishing pose an ongoing threat to the species.

A new report by James Cook University (JCU) researchers reveals a long-term decline in the vulnerable species in a region stretching from Mission Beach in Far North Queensland to Bundaberg and Hervey Bay.

JCU's Centre for Tropical Water and Aquatic Ecosystem Research (TropWATER) has been conducting aerial surveys every five years and the last survey in November 2022 showed a 5.7 per cent drop per year since 2005 in Hervey Bay.

TropWATER dugong researcher Dr Chris Cleguer said two major floods in 2022 had destroyed large areas of seagrass habitat around this region.

"When seagrass gets disturbed or disappears dugongs have different options," he said.

"Some might stay in the area and survive, some might stay in the area and not make it because of food deprivation, and some might actually try to move to other areas."

Dr Cleguer said the dugong population between Mission Beach, three hours north of Townsville, and Bundaberg, four hours north of Brisbane, was also suffering an estimated annual decline of 2.3 per cent.

"The area between the Whitsundays south to Bundaberg is of primary concern. We only spotted a few calves in that area with low densities of dugongs," he said.

"There are many, many places in the world where only a handful of dugongs are left, so obviously we are trying to do everything we can to not have that happen across the Great Barrier Reef."

### Why are dugongs disappearing?

Degradation of seagrass habitats and gill netting are among the major threats to dugong populations along the Queensland coast, the report found.

"Dugongs are very responsive to environmental disturbances, so dugongs are almost entirely reliant on seagrass as their food source," said Great Barrier Reef fisheries campaign manager at the Australian Marine Society, Simon Miller.

"Climate change is, of course, a big factor, but there's local impacts that really need to be addressed as well like bycatch in commercial gillnets, boat strikes, and loss of seagrass from water pollution."

### **What needs to happen?**

Dr Cleguer said more research was needed to better understand the threats to dugongs and how to manage them.

"The results are clearly showing that we need to put more effort into understanding what is causing the threats, and where and how we can better manage them," he said.

"Making sure that seagrass meadows are in good shape and in good health is extremely important."

Mr Miller said it was important "we do everything that we can to help" the dugong population on the southern Great Barrier Reef.

"Unfortunately gillnet fishing still occurs in these areas and leads to the mortality of dugongs, and contributes to the decline in that population," he said.

"The Queensland government has already committed to phasing out gillnets from the Great Barrier Reef, which is a fantastic outcome, but that won't happen completely until 2027.

"We need urgent action now."

The surveys showed dugongs remain abundant in some areas, including Hinchinbrook, Townsville's Cleveland Bay, and Shoalwater Bay.