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## National Geographic Readers: Manatees

By: Laura Marsh

Follow gentle manatees through their marshy habitats, learn how they raise their young, and discover the threats to their environment.

**6-8**

Age Range

**15-30 mins**

Length

**520L**

Lexile<sup>®</sup> Measure

**3.2**

AR Level

# Manatees

Laura Marsh



Washington, D.C.

# Who Am I?

I have whiskers,  
but I am not a cat.

I nibble on grass,  
but I am not a cow.

I have gray, wrinkled  
skin, but I am not an  
elephant.

Who am I?  
**A manatee!**



# Mighty Manatees



Manatees often rest in groups.

We can

Q

Where do manatees keep their money?

In the riverbank!

A

Manatees are mammals that live in the water. They are sometimes called “sea cows.”

Why?

Manatees are gentle and they move slowly, like cows. They also graze on sea grass, just like cows eat grass.

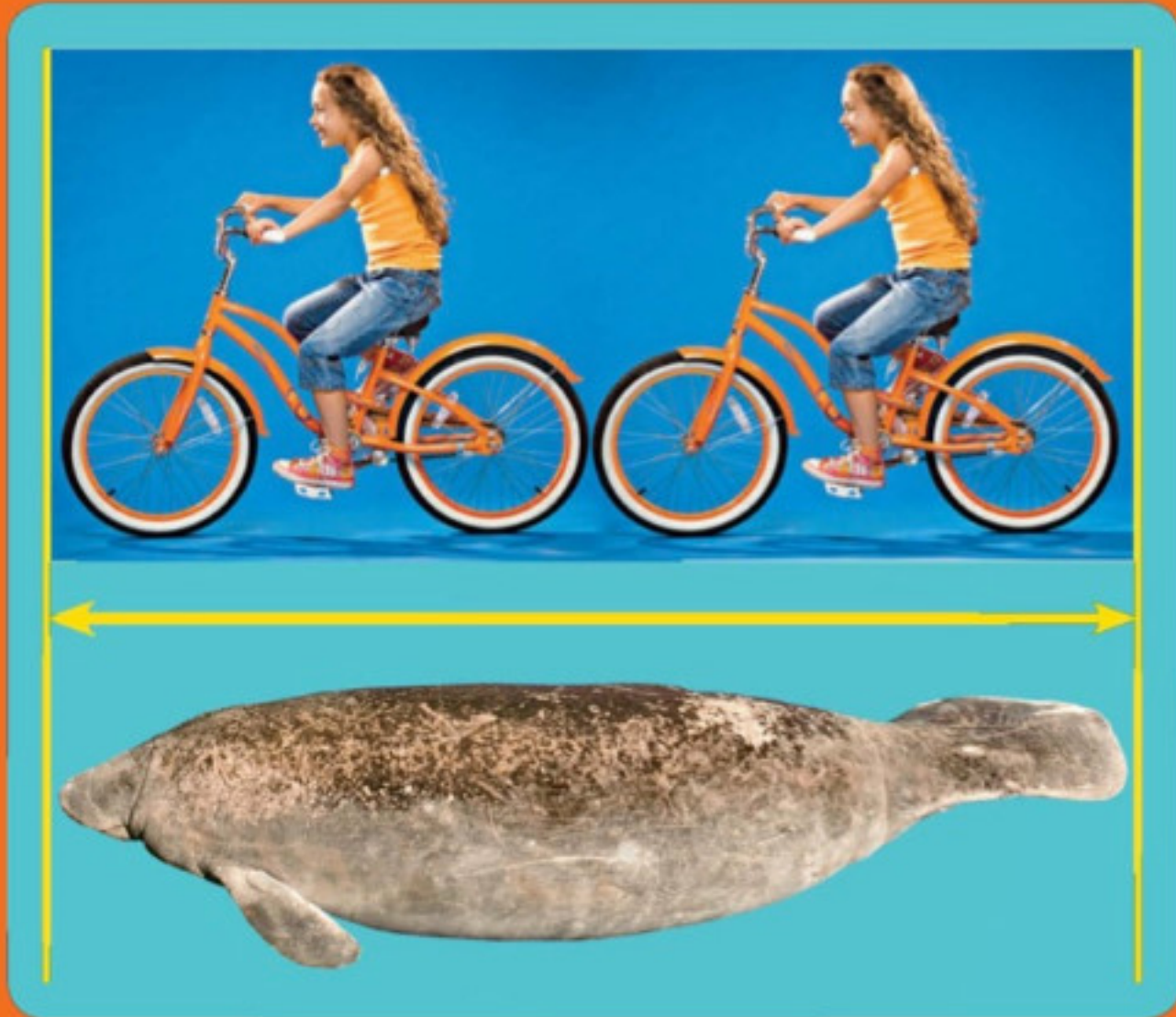
## Water Words



**MAMMAL:** An animal that has a backbone and is warm-blooded. It feeds its babies milk.

**GRAZE:** To feed in an area covered with grasses

Manatees are big. They are usually about ten feet long. That's as long as two kids' bikes lined up end to end.



Manatees are heavy, too. Most adult manatees weigh about 1,000 pounds. That's the weight of about 21 second graders!

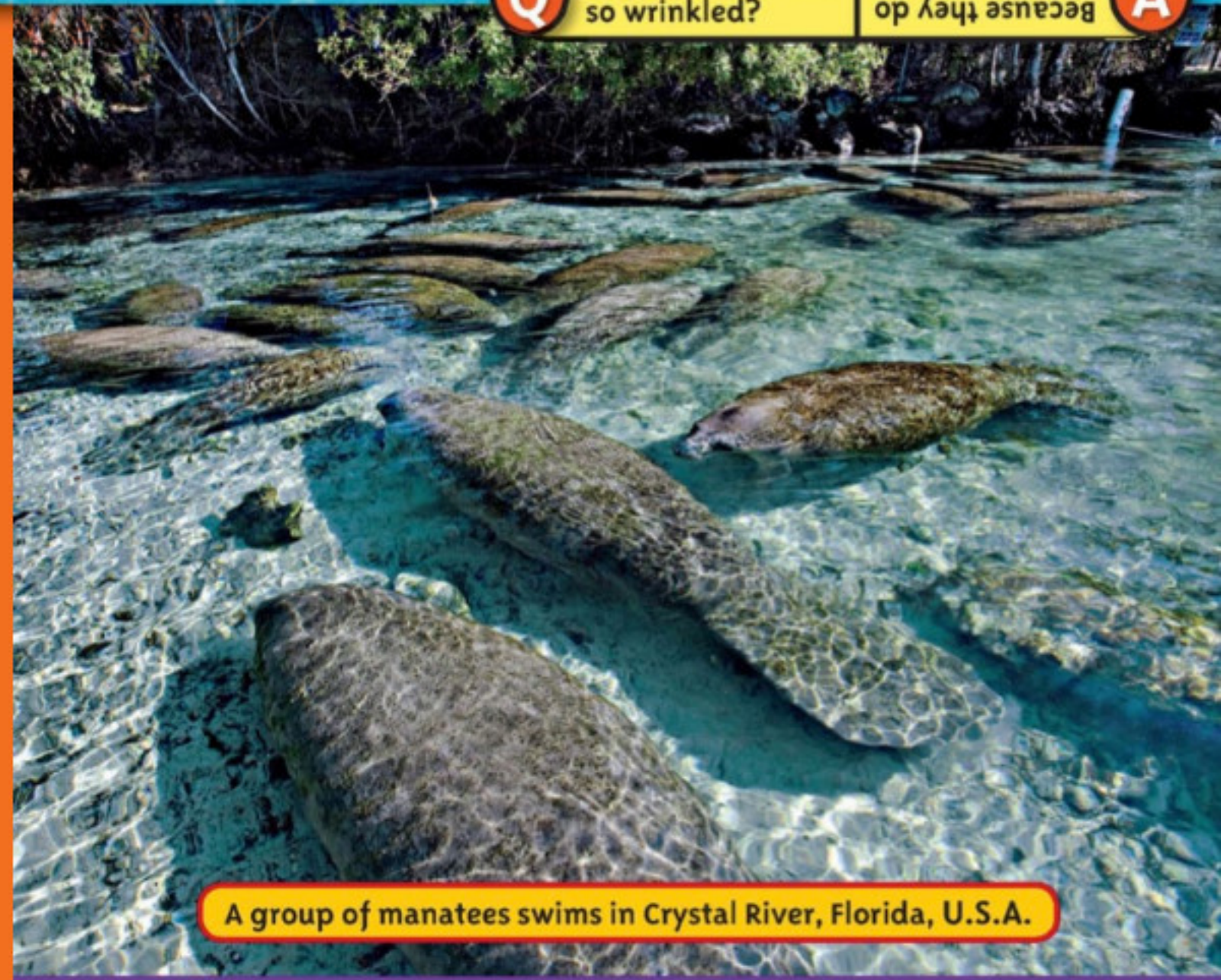
# Super Swimmers

Manatees can move their large bodies gracefully through the water. They swim upside down and roll. They even do somersaults (SUM-ur-sawltz)!



**Q** Why are manatees so wrinkled?

**A** Because they do not use iron!



A group of manatees swims in Crystal River, Florida, U.S.A.

Manatees don't like water that is too deep. They like to stay in shallow water in oceans and rivers. There, they find food and warm water.

A manatee's body is built for living in the water.

**TAIL:** It is large, flat, and round at the end. It moves up and down to power the manatee through the water.

**EYES:** They are small, but manatees can see well, even in cloudy water.

**NOSTRILS:** Manatees breathe air through these holes. But they close tightly underwater.

**FLIPPERS:** They help steer the manatee. They also bring food to its mouth.

**LIPS:** They are big and strong. They wrap around plants and pull them into the manatee's mouth.

# Munching on Lunch

Manatees are herbivores (HUR-buh-vores). They eat plants for about six to eight hours every day.



A manatee grazes on sea plants.



Manatees have no front teeth. They don't need them because they don't eat meat.

Manatees have only large back teeth called molars. The molars help grind their food.

**Water  
Word**



**HERBIVORE:** An animal that eats only plants

# Fun Facts 7 About Manatees

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1



They lose teeth all through their lives. New teeth replace them.

2



The elephant is a distant relative of the manatee.

3



Fat in the mother's milk helps a young manatee grow quickly.

4



They do not have eyelashes.

5



Bones in a manatee's flipper are similar to those in a human hand.

6



They do not use their mouth to breathe. They only use their nostrils.

7



They have no natural enemies. Humans are their biggest threat.



# Big Babies

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These young manatees are fed milk from a bottle. Without their mothers, they need help to eat.

A manatee baby is called a calf. It is born underwater. A newborn calf is about the size of a nine-year-old kid.



The mother pushes the calf to the surface to take its first breath. Within an hour, the calf can swim on its own.

Like other mammal babies, a manatee drinks its mother's milk. Soon it learns how to find sea grasses to eat.

The calf must stay with its mother for the first two years. The mother teaches her calf how to live on its own.

A calf needs to stick with its mom.



# On the Move

Manatees do not stay in one place. They migrate (MY-grate).

In summer, manatees can be found in many states.

In winter, most manatees return to Florida. The water is warmer there.

## Water Word



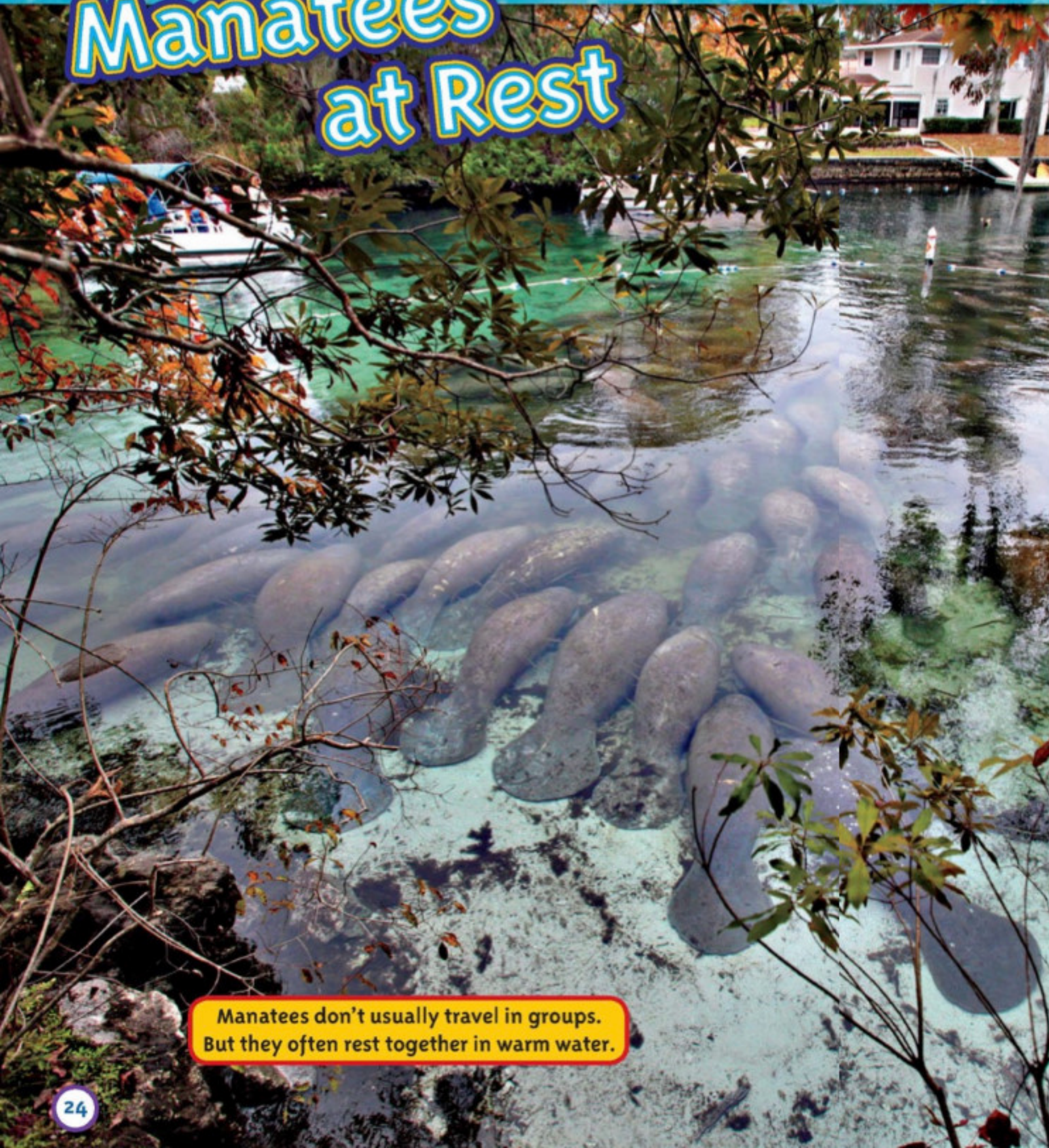
**MIGRATE:** To move from one area to another for food or a mate



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# Manatees at Rest



Manatees don't usually travel in groups. But they often rest together in warm water.

Manatees need rest, like you. But they don't sleep like you do.

They rest for about 15 minutes at a time. Then they need to come to the surface to breathe.

Manatees sometimes rest at the bottom of the sea or river. They can also float near the top of the water when resting.

# Keeping Manatees Safe

There are many dangers for manatees. They are often hit by boats because they are big and slow and swim near the surface. Manatees can be hard to see in the water.



This manatee has scars from an injury by a boat propeller.



How do manatees turn their pancakes?

They use their flippers!



People also throw trash and fishing line into the water. Swallowing trash can hurt manatees. Fishing line can get tangled around manatees so they can't swim.

Manatees are endangered (in-DANE-jurd).

There are about 5,000 Florida manatees left.

But laws protect them.

There are also special areas for manatees called sanctuaries (SANGK-choo-er-eez). In a sanctuary, people can't disturb manatees. They can live safely there and raise their young.



The roped-off area shows where people are not allowed to go.

### Water Word



**ENDANGERED:** At risk of dying out

**SANCTUARY:** A safe place set aside for animals in nature

# Stump Your Parents

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Can your parents answer these questions about manatees?  
You might know more than they do!

Answers at bottom of page 31.



1

Where do manatees live?

- A. In cool, refreshing water
- B. In warm, shallow water
- C. In deep, warm water
- D. On the beach



2

A baby manatee is called . . .

- A. A cub
- B. A cow
- C. A calf
- D. A foal



3

What do manatees like to eat?

- A. Plants
- B. Crabs
- C. Fruit
- D. Steak



4

A manatee's lips . . .

- A. Are very small
- B. Are perfect for lipstick
- C. Get in the way when eating
- D. Grab and pull plants into its mouth



5

Manatees rest . . .

- A. For many hours
- B. For about 30 minutes at a time
- C. For about 15 minutes at a time
- D. Not at all



6

A manatee uses its flippers to . . .

- A. Do the backstroke
- B. Slap the water
- C. Steer through the water
- D. Wave to other manatees



7

To keep manatees safe, people should NOT . . .

- A. Bother manatees in any way
- B. Drive boats really fast
- C. Throw trash in the water
- D. Do any of the above



**ENDANGERED:** At risk of dying out



**GRAZE:** To feed in an area covered with grasses



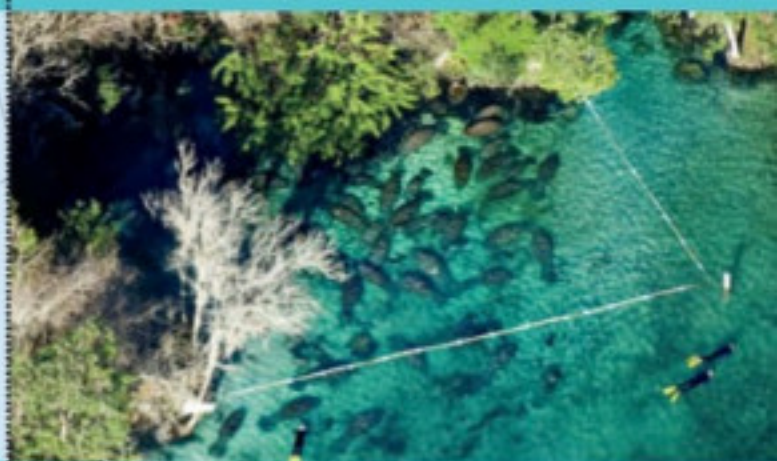
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