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Keep our marine life out of strife! (Dugongs in Queensland) Media Release

2 December 2002

Coastcare Week 2002

Australian marine experts and Coastcare Week ambassadors, Ron and Valerie Taylor, today urged all Queenslanders to protect the habitat of dugong or risk losing them forever!

The Taylors have issued the call as part of Coastcare Week (1 -7 December), which is drawing attention to the plight of Australia's threatened and vulnerable marine species in a new campaign - 'The Coast is our Home'.

Valerie Taylor, who was awarded the 2002 Australian Senior Achiever of the Year for marine conservation said that northern Australia has the last significant population of dugong in the world. The once common dugong is now listed as a vulnerable species with the population continuing to decline.

Ron and Valerie Taylor have been worldwide pioneers in marine education for over 50 years. They filmed the live shark sequences in the blockbuster movie 'Jaws' for Steven Spielberg in the 1970's and made a series of hit television programs about marine life.

"The tropical dugong is the only fully herbivorous marine mammal and the only Sirenian (sea cow) to occur in Australia. It is extinct or near extinct in most of its former range which extended from East Africa to South-east Asia and the western Pacific," said Ms Taylor.

"The dugong survives solely on seagrasses and may become extinct if the seagrass dies off. At one time dugong were very common in Queensland waters, but due to a range of pressures, population numbers have quickly declined and they are now listed as vulnerable to extinction.

"Accidental entanglement in fishing and shark net, injuries caused by boat strikes and loss of valuable seagrasses, have resulted in a decline in dugong numbers in Queensland," she said.

Seagrass meadows can be destroyed by direct disturbances like dredging, or indirectly, through deterioration in water quality. Farming, gardening and household wastewater add soil, silt nutrients and pollutants to rivers and stormwater.

The multiple stresses from coastal development and urban and agricultural run-off also reduce the resilience of seagrasses to other natural impacts such as storms or floods. The 1992 Mary River flood smothered vast seagrass beds in Hervey Bay, and over 100 dugong starved to death and about 1000 were displaced.

Ron Taylor said there are numerous things people can do to protect and conserve dugong.

"Sometimes there isn't much we can do about mother nature, however boaters can help protect dugong by not travelling fast over seagrass meadows as this increases the chance of striking a dugong.

"A deep boat propeller strike is almost certain to cause death or at least severe injury to a dugong as they are slow-moving and have little protection against predators," Mr Taylor said.

"Dugong can accidentally drown when they become trapped in fish and shark nets. They can also get entangled in plastic, old nets, fishing line and rope that have been thrown into the sea.

"To protect these magnificent animals it is imperative that everyone takes their rubbish home with them. The ocean is not our dumping ground."

In Australia, dugong swim in the shallow coastal waters of northern Australia from the Queensland/New South Wales border in the east to Shark Bay on the Western Australian coast. They are also found in other parts of the Indian and Pacific Oceans in warm shallow seas. Dugong are usually found in shallow waters protected from large waves and storms and they surface only to breathe, and never come on to land.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders the marine environment still contributes strongly to their cultural, spiritual, social and economic identity and wellbeing. The significance of this relationship also relates to species like dugong and turtles whereby hunting is still very important.

Indigenous Coastcare Facilitator for Coastal Queensland, Jean Fenton said, "A number of Indigenous communities have hunting management plans to reduce hunting where required so as to ensure the long-term sustainability of dugong numbers.

"Already some Indigenous communities and groups have self imposed no hunting rules until they are informed that the species have sufficiently recovered. Some groups have restrictions on take numbers of dugong and seasonal closure of hunting areas," Ms Fenton said.

The Seagrass-Watch program, established in 1998 as an initiative of the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, involves local community groups in mapping and monitoring seagrass habitats vital for fisheries, turtles and dugongs.

Seagrass-Watch programs have been established in Hervey Bay, the Whitsundays, Townsville and Cairns, and more recently in the Moreton Bay Marine Park to provide an important early warning of changes to seagrass habitat in each region.

Mapping of seagrass communities by trained community volunteers and seagrass researchers resulted in the successful mapping of 22% of the sites in a detailed baseline survey of Hervey Bay and Great Sandy Straits region in December 1998.

Long-term monitoring sites, including areas of high impacts and 'control' sites, have been established at over forty locations throughout Queensland. These sites are monitored by over 300 volunteers.

Moreton Bay Marine Park provides an important habitat for dugong. Moreton Bay is the southern-most limit for dugong in Queensland. Most dugong in the Bay are located on the eastern side where water quality is high and extensive seagrass beds are found. Moreton Bay Marine Park is the only place in the world where large numbers of these shy creatures can be found near a major city.

Moreton Bay is a focus for recreational activity in south-east Queensland. Maintaining the habitat quality for dugongs in Moreton Bay in the face of increasing pressure is a major challenge for dugong conservation.

People are encouraged to report any dead, sick or injured dugong by calling 1300 360 898 any time.

Coastcare is a program of the Commonwealth Government's Natural Heritage Trust, in partnership with State/Territory and Local Governments.

For more information on Coastcare or to join a Coastcare group, please call Environment Australia's Community Information Unit on 1800 803 772 or visit the web site at: www.ea.gov.au/coasts/coastcare

Further Media Information:

Interviews with Ron & Valerie Taylor, contact Ross Woodward or Jessica Morrow from Media Key on (03) 9787 5844. Media in Queensland can also contact Bob Hearle, Queensland Coastcare Coordinator, direct by calling 07 3227 7104.

- [QLD Regional Coastcare Facilitators](#)



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[Department of the Environment and Water Resources](#)

GPO Box 787 Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

Telephone: +61 (0)2 6274 1111 | [ABN](#)

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