



Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of Dugongs and their Habitats throughout their Range

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GULF COLLABORATION CONCEPT

Prepared by the Dugong MOU Secretariat

Background

1. The seagrass habitats of the Arabian Gulf in Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) support one of the largest known dugong populations in the world based on studies conducted in 1986. While there has been some effort to assess the population of dugongs in the Gulf region in the last 20 years, the dugong's current conservation status in the Arabian Gulf is classified as 'Data Deficient'.

2. In 1986 an extensive first assessment covered nearly all the dugong habitats in the Arabian Gulf (34,144 km²) and estimated a population of approximately 6,000 dugongs. Since this report, with the exception of the UAE, there have been few sporadic aerial surveys in the last 20 years; from 2005 to 2008 surveys were conducted in Bahrain and Qatar. However, the population estimates generated from these aerial surveys are of limited comparative value across countries due to inconsistent methodologies for surveying and data analysis.

Gulf Collaboration Concept

3. The Gulf Collaboration Concept intends to be the first regional co-ordinated effort to use shared technical expertise and resources to assess the distribution and population status of dugongs and seagrasses. In addition to their biodiversity value, dugongs have important cultural significance in the Gulf region.

4. The Gulf Collaboration Concept aims to promote closer cooperation and collaborative action amongst the Gulf dugong Range States to:

- a. assess the distribution and population status of dugongs and seagrasses;
- b. reduce bycatch of marine megafauna including marine mammals, sharks and turtles;
- c. address barriers to behavioural change; and
- d. deliver policy recommendations.

5. The Gulf Collaboration Concept consists of two components: the Gulf Dugong Action Programme, and the Gulf Bycatch Proposal. The two components would result in more informed policy and decision-making with regards to dugong conservation and would lead to more targeted conservation actions at national and sub-regional levels that take into account social, financial, technical and regulatory aspects.

6. The CMS Dugong MOU Secretariat has had preliminary bilateral discussions with the Gulf Range States to describe the Gulf Collaboration Concept, as well as with the Secretariat of the Gulf Cooperation Council, to seek feedback on its value-added to the sub-region.

** Reissued for technical reasons.*

7. In addition, various potential sources of funding to implement the Gulf Collaboration Concept have been identified and approached but to date no funding has been secured.

Gulf Dugong Action Programme

8. The Gulf Dugong Action Programme will collect baseline information on dugong population, distribution, abundance and threats, using tools and initiatives developed by the CMS Dugong MOU including the Dugong and Seagrass Research Toolkit and the CMS Dugong MOU Standardised Dugong Catch and Bycatch Questionnaire (CMS Dugong MOU Questionnaire). Range States will also identify and map areas of important dugong habitat, and assess the relative risks to distinct populations.

9. Using this baseline information, Gulf Range States will be able to identify dugong hot spots and undertake targeted aerial surveys to collect detailed information on dugong population estimates and distribution.

Gulf Bycatch Proposal

10. There has been no coordinated effort in the Gulf Region to quantify and understand the primary factors driving the rate of bycatch of marine megafauna. As such, there is a critical requirement for this information to target policy and regulatory reforms to reduce unnecessary deaths of vulnerable species. In order to generate long term practical solutions, fishery stakeholders must be involved to identify underlying socioeconomic factors which influence community attitudes and behaviour.

11. This requirement has been endorsed by numerous stakeholders such as Emirates Wildlife Society (EWS) – WWF, the UNEP Regional Office for West Asia, the Environment Society of Oman, CMS Indian Ocean South East Asia (IOSEA) Marine Turtle MOU, and Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi. Driven by this endorsement the Dugong MOU Secretariat developed the Gulf Bycatch Proposal.

12. The Gulf Bycatch Proposal seeks to quantify and understand the primary factors driving the rate of bycatch of dugongs and other migratory marine megafauna. In order to create long-term solutions, governments would work with stakeholders to identify the underlying socioeconomic factors that influence community attitudes and behaviour towards dugongs and bycatch.

13. The flexibility and low cost of implementing the CMS Dugong MOU Questionnaire means that Gulf countries can quickly develop a snapshot of the distribution of dugongs and fishery overlaps, and identify hotspot areas where conservation action might be needed.

14. It will provide information on dugong numbers, trends in captures and evidence of fisher-dugong interactions for a large part of the dugong's range that was previously unavailable, and provides a stepping-stone to more focused research in the areas where dugongs were found to exist and where fishery pressures were high.

CMS Dugong MOU initiatives

15. The Gulf Collaboration Concept can feed into, and be supported by a number of CMS Dugong MOU Initiatives including:

- a. The Global Dugong Genetics Project, which aims to examine the phylogeography of the dugong based on biological samples collected throughout the dugong's Gulf State Range. It will update conservation and management actions through mapping the distribution of

discrete dugong populations; identifying historical and potential migratory routes; and highlighting small populations as a priority for conservation.

- b. The Dugong and Seagrass Research Toolkit will provide an easily accessible online resource that incorporates decision-making for the selection of the most appropriate methodologies for studies of dugongs, seagrasses and the associated human communities. The Dugong and Seagrass Research Toolkit is targeted for use by researchers, non-government/civil society managers and decision-makers including in dugong Gulf Range States.

Conservation outcomes

16. The Gulf Collaboration Concept will contribute to the sub-regional assessment of the conservation status of dugongs in the Northwest Indian Ocean region. The information obtained from the concept will include dugong population distribution, size and trends, seagrass distribution, and anthropogenic impacts and pressures.

17. While the Gulf Collaboration Concept largely focusses on dugongs as a flagship species, conservation of seagrass habitats will directly benefit many other marine species as well as the marine and coastal environment. It will enable partnership and knowledge sharing between Gulf Range States to collect baseline information on the population of dugongs in the Gulf, and to identify and implement effective conservation actions in the region.

Conclusion

18. Given the global significance of the dugong population in the Gulf, the need to update the conservation status and to identify key threats and conservation interventions, high-level endorsement of the Gulf Collaboration Concept and finding resources for implementation by the Gulf Range States is urgently required.