

# New book inspires children to protect dugongs

July 11 2012

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Australia's children are being enlisted in the fight to save dugongs from the multiple threats of coastal development, climate change, and environmental pollution, thanks to the creative mind of marine biologist Dr Mariana Fuentes.

Launching today at the 12Th International Coral Reef Symposium, in Cairns her new book takes readers into the secret world of 'Dhyum', a real dugong living in the Torres Strait.

In 'Dhyum the dugong' the author, Dr Fuentes from the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral [Reef Studies](#) at James Cook University, takes the reader on a charming journey through the dugong's life, from how they are born to how we can protect them.

"The Torres Strait is known as the 'dugong capital of the world' because the seas have the greatest population of these wonderful marine mammals," says Dr Fuentes, who worked closely with the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) and Sea Management staff while writing the book.

"By telling readers about the lives of dugongs – such as what they eat, where they live and what harms them – the book aims to make young Australians more aware of the sea mammal and its vulnerabilities."

In the book, Dhyum explains to children that "It's very difficult for dugongs to escape from fast moving boats. In areas with lots of boats,

dugongs can be hit, particularly if the water is shallow." He encourages them to "learn about dugongs so you can help to look after them. Find out where they live, how they move between places, how big their families are and how their numbers change over time".

"Readers will then understand better how we can protect them. For example, knowing that seagrass – the staple food of dugongs – dies off when water is too polluted, can encourage the community to keep the ocean clean," Dr Fuentes says.

She also explains current research into dugongs and how the scientific findings are being used to help local Torres Strait Islander communities develop their conservation plans.

"By explaining that dugongs, like Dhyum himself, which was satellite-tagged in 2010, to inform rangers and scientists how and where they move, I wanted to demonstrate the various ways dugongs can be studied.

"The story includes information on how dugongs move from Torres Strait to Papua New Guinea, so now communities in both countries are working together to help protect them".

"One of the main reasons I wrote the book was to help children and the general public appreciate how we can use science to look after endangered animals," Dr Fuentes says.

Apart from being distributed to schools across the Torres Strait, the book will also be used by Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) rangers as part of their environmental education program.

"Dugongs have great cultural and social importance to Australia's Indigenous peoples living near the Great Barrier Reef and in Torres Strait," says Dr Fuentes. "It is vital that the coming generation realises

how a loss in dugong numbers could spell problems for both marine ecosystems and for Indigenous communities."

The TSRA chairperson, Mr Toshie Kris, says the book is a great example of collaboration between Torres Strait Islanders and the scientific community.

"To have scientists and TSRA staff working together on communication products that benefit the broader Torres Strait Islander community is tremendous," Mr Kris says. "Dugong conservation is a vital issue for Torres Strait Islanders and Dr Fuentes's book will help children understand the importance of looking after these endangered mammals".

"This book will be valuable for our Land and Sea Rangers as they work with communities to protect and conserve dugongs."

'Dhyum the dugong' will be launched during the 12th International Coral Reef Symposium in Cairns Convention Centre, Room MR5, on Wednesday, 11 July 2012, at 1.00pm. Media are welcome to attend.

**More information:** After the launch, softcopies of the book can be downloaded for free from the ARC Centre of Excellence website at <http://www.coralcoe.org.au/> or at Dr Fuentes' website <http://marianafuentes.com>.

Provided by ARC Centre of Excellence in Coral Reef Studies

Citation: New book inspires children to protect dugongs (2012, July 11) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-07-children-dugongs.html>

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