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Dugongs in the Northern Territory (Australia)*

Aerial surveys conducted since 1974 have confirmed the presence of significant populations of Dugongs in Northern Australia (Heinsohn *et al.*, 1976, 1978 and in press). Whereas the surveys reported to date have been restricted to the Queensland coast, we report in this note the results of the first aerial survey for Dugongs off the coast of the Northern Territory (Fig. 1).

Using the techniques of Heinsohn *et al.* (1976 and in press), almost the entire coast of the Northern Territory, from 15km east of the Western Australian State Border (Turtle Point) as indicated in Figure 1, to the Queensland State Border, was surveyed from November 6 to 13, 1977, from a twin-engined, high-winged Partenavia P68-B aircraft. Areas not surveyed during this period due to time and fuel restrictions were as follows: the Wessel Islands, between Elcho Island and Cape Wessel, which are unlikely to be suitable Dugong habitat as they have mainly rocky shore lines and drop off into deep water; and a stretch of coast south of the Edward Pellew Islands (Pelican Spit to Port Macarthur). However this latter area was surveyed by the pilot and one observer on November 16, 1977 and the count is included in the total below.

A total of 557 Dugongs were counted during 57.5 hours of aerial survey time (9.7 Dugongs per survey hour). Figure 1 shows the distribution and numbers of Dugongs sighted. Except for one aggregation of 27 Dugongs seen near Elcho Island and seven aggregations of 15 to 20 Dugongs seen in other areas group sizes of Dugongs were usually small.

The number of Dugongs seen along the Northern Territory coast was generally disappointing and contrasted with the sighting of 374 Dugongs during a six hour survey (62.3 Dugongs per survey hour) of the Wellesley Islands, Queensland, on November 15, 1977 (Marsh *et al.*, MS).

In view of its possession of many shallow protected bays and channels with beds of seagrasses, we assessed much of the Northern Territory coast as being good to excellent Dugong habitat. However, in many of the best-looking areas, despite generally good survey conditions, only a few or no Dugongs were seen. It is unfortunate that it was not possible to survey the entire coast at or near high tide.

More aerial surveys of the Northern Territory coast, preferably at different times of the year, are needed before Dugong numbers can be reliably assessed. The results of this survey, however, leave no room for complacency as they suggest that Dugong numbers in the Northern Territory are generally low despite the low human population density and remote nature of almost all of the coastal areas.

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