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The Elusive Manatee Makes New Friends in Costa Rica and Nicaragua

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by Ben Jolliffe

The West Indian manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) shouldn't be an elusive catch. Putting away an impressive 100 pounds of aquatic plants a day, it averages 10 feet in length, weighs in at about 1,000 pounds and, being a mammal, rises to the surface to breathe every five minutes or so.

Yet a team of researchers in Costa Rica – including several world-renowned manatee experts and a skilled marine hunter – who have been working to capture one of this globally threatened species are finding it elusive, coming away empty-handed on several different occasions.

As part of a bigger manatee conservation project across northern Costa Rica and southern Nicaragua financed by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), they are trying to tag a manatee with a VHF tracking device for further study and observation.

The project by Fundación Amigos del Río San Juan (FUNDAR) in partnership with Fundación Salvemos al Manatí de Costa Rica (FSMCR) is being supported by CEPF as part of its strategic approach in the southern region of the Mesoamerica Hotspot to promote environmental awareness and conservation through charismatic species.

However, the large mammal, also known as the Caribbean manatee, is wary of man and surprisingly agile under water. And although the manatee's numbers have restabilized in recent years thanks to habitat conservation and law enforcement, the means by which the growing number of tourists are exploring the Caribbean coasts of Costa Rica and Nicaragua has become one of the its worst enemies.

The motorboats that carry tourists exploring the tropical forests and riverways of Tortuguero and San Juan are colliding with the animals, either killing them outright or injuring them badly.

Evolved from four-footed land mammals, their lungs and uniquely positioned diaphragm extend the



© G Rathburn USFWS
The manatee reproduces infrequently, slowing population recovery.



© Carlos Espinosa
Local people, such as 80-year-old hunter Bill Sambola, are volunteering their services to help conserve the manatee. He knows the area better than most people.

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the manatee now comes up in everyday conversations among local people all the time. Sightings are noted, behavior and population figures discussed. The enthusiasm and love of manatees that Jiménez helped to inspire in Espinosa will no doubt find more willing people in the future.

Perhaps it won't be long before Tortuguero – “turtle catcher” as it was named by the early European arrivals – needs another, more sympathetic name to reflect the arrival of another, more environmentally aware age.

For further information, contact Carlos Espinosa, c_espin@racsa.co.cr or visit www.fundacionmanati.org or www.fundar.org.ni.

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