

# Commercial exploitation of manatees *Trichechus* in Brazil c. 1785–1973

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- [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0006-3207\(82\)90009-X](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0006-3207(82)90009-X), [How to Cite or Link Using DOI](#)
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Biol. cons. 22(2): 101-126 (1982)

## Abstract

All available published statistics on the exploitation of the Amazonian manatee *Trichechus inunguis* are collected and analysed to determine the major trends in exploitation and, if possible, their effects on the species. The manatee's role in the Amazonian economy has traditionally been on the level of subsistence hunting for local consumption; export of surplus manatee products has been limited and sporadic, and keeping of records has been even more so. Unknown quantities of manatee meat were shipped to the Guianas and West Indies in the 17th century. At least from the 1780s to about 1925, the only manatee product common in Amazonian commerce was mixira (fried meat packed in lard). From 1935 to 1954, manatee hides were exported to southern Brazil and elsewhere for the manufacture of heavy-duty leather. From 1954 to the legal banning of manatee hunting in 1973, manatees were again heavily exploited for meat. At no time did manatee products make up more than a small fraction of a percent of the Amazon region's trade. Numbers of animals killed per year cannot be determined with any precision, but early statistics on mixira reflect no more than 1000/year, while the peak years of hide and meat production probably required 4000–7000 manatees/year, exclusive of unrecorded subsistence hunting. Taking the latter into account, it is likely that actual mortality ran to several thousand animals per year throughout the past two centuries. Decline of meat production in the 1960s may reflect overexploitation. Evidence was also found of some exploitation for meat of West Indian manatees *T. manatus* in the states of Alagoas and Bahia, Brazil, the latter constituting the southernmost record of the species since the early 19th century.