



Going back to my roots

Confirmed sightings of the Antillean manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) on the coast of Ilha de Marajó, northern Brazilian coast

The Antillean manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) and the Amazonian manatee (*T. inunguis*) were once so abundant in northern Brazil that they could be harvested in dozens on a single occasion and in a certain locality. In Brazil, commercial catches of manatees were even reported in government statistics through the 1980's. In consequence, both species were presumably hunted to near extinction in most of their range along the northern Brazilian coast. For decades, information on the occurrence of both *T. manatus* and *T. inunguis* in the Amazon River Delta was as rare as their expected coexistence. In fact, a possible sympatric occurrence of *T. manatus* and *T. inunguis* on a wide stretch of coast in Brazil had been intriguing scientists for a long time. Dr Daryl P. Domning, a renowned sirenian specialist based at Howard University, Washington DC, was interested on the status and distribution of Antillean and Amazon manatees near the mouth of the Amazon River. While based in Manaus, Brazil, during the late 1970's, Dr Domning motivated himself to undertake a survey of manatees in the mouth of Amazon River. The expedition was carried out in May and June 1978. According to Domning (1981), observations of sympatric or contiguously occurring living forms would be of great value to studies of sirenian evolutionary biology, but only one area in the world today provides any hope of finding two sirenians species living in sympatry. The main objective of such expedition was to determine the present distributions of the two species in this region and identify areas of possible sympatry.

After interviews with hunters and a collection of skulls, Domning's survey indicated that *T. inunguis* occurs throughout the region of the Amazon River estuaries from Amapá to the mainland of Pará, including the Ilha de Marajó and islands on

its [northern] Atlantic coast; *T. manatus* has a disjunct distribution in Brazil, apparently occurring both on the coast of Amapá north of Cabo Norte and in the Rio Mearim, Maranhão, as well as further to the southeast: it seems to have been exterminated from the Atlantic coast of Pará and is absent from the Marajó region. It seems that a long history of hunting has decimated most of the manatees' populations along the northern Brazilian coast.

It was only in the 1990's that new information could be obtained on Antillean manatees occurrence in Brazil. Based on interviews with fishermen, Luna (2001) provided evidence that *T. manatus* numbers have dwindled in most of their range along the northern Brazilian coast. Somehow, there were a few localities where the presence of manatees was positively reported.



Very recently, a team of scientists under Projeto Piatam Mar and Projeto Piatam Oceano – Potential Environmental Impacts & Risks of the Oil and Gas Industry in the Amazon, supported by Petrobras-Brazil Oil & Gas Company, has been successful in locating *T. manatus* on the east coast of Ilha de Marajó, in the Amazon River Delta. Surprisingly, this is of the areas previously reported by Domning (1981) where manatees had been extirpated by hunting. The hypothesis of a possible gap in the distribution of the *T. manatus* on the east coast of Ilha de Marajó has proved to be unconfirmed.

On the other hand, the first confirmed evidence of manatees occurring in the area came out with the recovery of a skull belonging to *T. manatus*. It was found in Soure, on the east coast of Ilha de Marajó, in November 2005. In fact, it does represent a confirmed record of an Antillean manatee for the coast of Pará in decades.

As a consequence, a series of regular field surveys were conducted every two-month, since September 2006, on the east coast of Ilha de Marajó. A total of 6 field trips and 20 days of beach monitoring, supported by Piatam Mar & Piatam Oceano, resulted in positive sightings of *T. manatus* groups. Two sightings of manatee groups entering the Garrote, Ilha de Marajó, on 12 February and 31 May 2007, as well as reported observations by fishermen and locals, also on February, May and June 2007, have confirmed their occurrence in the area.

It is noteworthy that fishermen were aware of manatee occurrence on the east coast of Ilha de Marajó. On May 2007, 40 experienced fishermen were interviewed in Soure for a survey on local ecological knowledge on aquatic mammals. 95% of the interviewed fishermen did report manatee occurrence in the area although they could not precise which species they were talking about.

The present data on manatee occurrence on the eastern coast of Ilha de Marajó provides new hope for the future of the species. It probably shows the ability of a marine mammal species to recover despite their past of difficulties. Yes, we all hope that manatees have a second chance.

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FURTHER READING

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Photographs by S. Siciliano. Manatee habitats on the east coast of Marajó Island, northern Brazil.

