

**ECOLOGY AND CONSERVATION STATUS OF THE WEST AFRICAN MANATEE
(*TRICHECHUS SENEGALENSIS*) IN ENIONG CREEK, SOUTH NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

The West African manatee (*Trichechus_Senegalensis*) is threatened with extinction. Information on its ecology is scanty. Manatee ecology in Eniong Creek, South South Nigeria was studied. Canoe cruises were made in three randomly selected days per week, two weeks per month in the lower, middle and upper sections of the creek for six months. Behavior, feeding habits and dung and gut contents were observed directly. Information from respondents was also obtained. Chi-square tests, regression analysis and percentages were used to analyse data. Results showed that the manatee fed on at least 15 different species of plants with *Ficus* spp identified by the highest percentage of respondents (94%). The number of manatee killed positively correlated (+0.96) with the number sighted in the same period. There was a decline in the population of manatee from 803 in 2002 to 264 in 2007. The decline was attributed to heavy poaching and habitat destruction. Playful behavior of the manatee included somersaulting, barrel rolling, head and tail standing, body surfing and upside down gliding making it attractive for ecotourism. Alternative livelihood options were recommended for the local people to stop them from poaching the manatee and destroying its habitat.

KEYWORDS: Manatee Ecology, Conservation Status, Eniong Creek, South, Nigeria