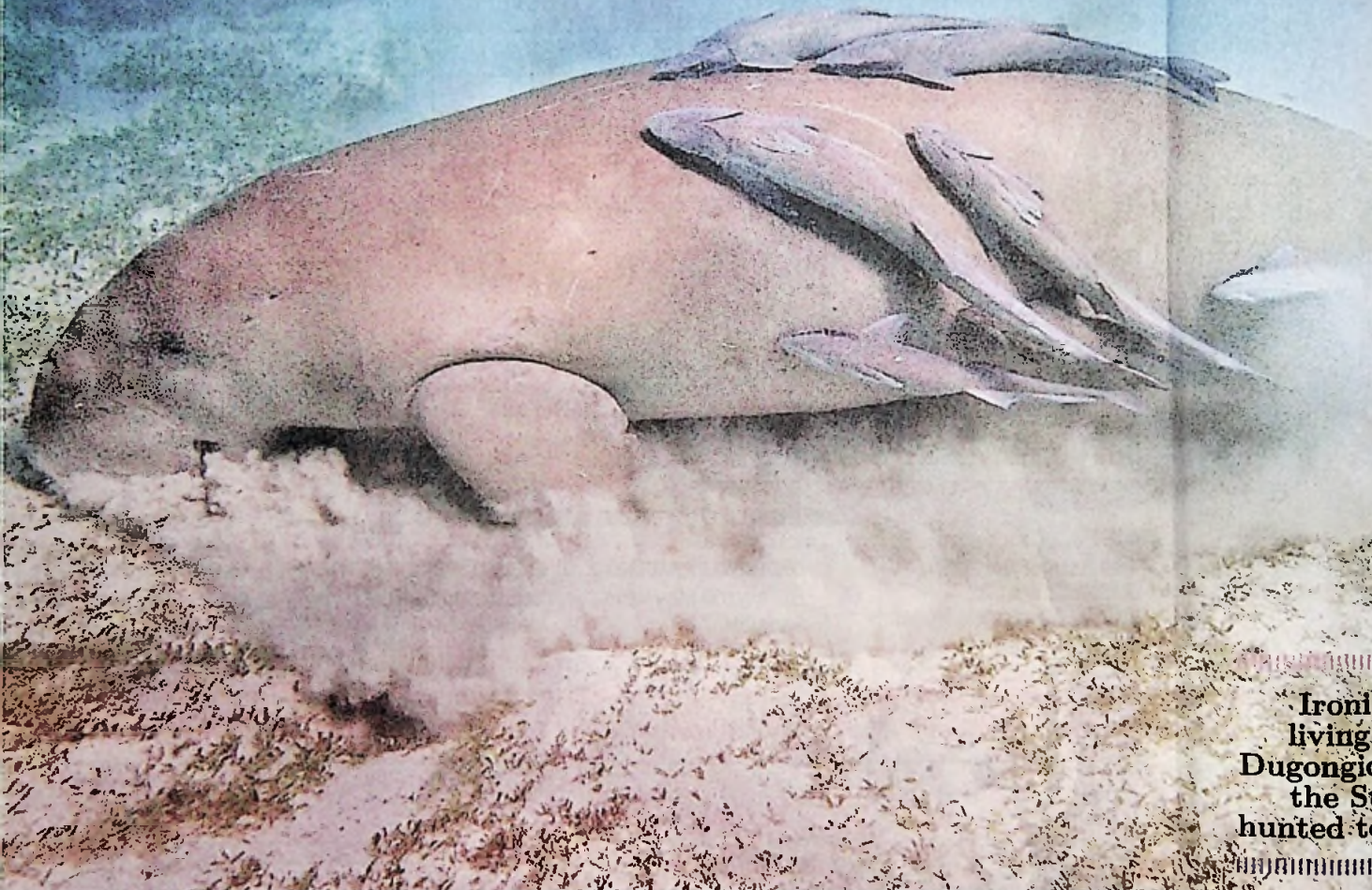


A NEW INITIATIVE TO MANAGE AND CONSERVE

DUGONGS

In Sri Lankan Waters



There is a mammal of Sri Lanka that can weigh up to 900Kg and grow to 3 metres in length, yet one that is rarely seen and whose local population teeters on the edge of extinction. In fact, records indicate that herds in their hundreds once swam off the North Western shores of the island. Today, we only know of them from an occasional report of a fisherman, or when their tortured bodies are dragged in with a day's catch. Hunted unmercifully over the centuries, and referred to as a *mudha ura* in Sinhala / *kadal pandi* in Tamil, the dugong has been persecuted, neglected and ignored and is about to disappear forever!

Ironically, the dugong is the only living representative of the Family Dugongidae. Its closest modern relative, the Steller's Sea Cow, was already hunted to extinction in the 18th century. A gentle herbivore that occasionally eats invertebrates, dugongs can live to the biblical span of three score years and ten (70). Yet, in Sri Lanka, we continue to treat them "... in the interests of the kitchen", stealing them from Nature's ever-decreasing larder that will soon be bereft even of their number. That is unless we do something about it, and soon.

Someone who is, is Dr. Steve Creech, a marine biologist, fishery scientist, activist and a Director of Pelagikos. Pelagikos was set up to provide administrative, management and technical services to the Seafood Exporters' Association of Sri Lanka. Since 2015, pelagikos has been working with Sri Lankan fishermen, fishworkers, boat owners, agents, seafood manufacturers and government



Dr. Steve Creech

authorities, as well as with marine conservation organisations in North America, to promote sustainable, socially responsible and economically equitable Sri Lankan seafood. A fishery's ecological impact on non-target species, in particular endangered, threatened and protected species is a critical component of international rating / certification programmes for 'sustainably sourced seafood'. Concerns raised

by the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch Programme about the risk posed to dugongs by blue swimming crab fisheries in the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay, led to Pelagikos conducting research with fishermen in both fisheries. The results provide an insight into the level of risk posed to dugongs by small scale crab fisheries off the northwest coast of Sri Lanka and suggest how accidental deaths of dugongs due to coastal fisheries could be reduced in the future.

Wildlife & Nature Protection Society is happy to announce that Dr. Steve Creech will be presenting the June installment of its monthly Lecture Series on June 21, 2018 at the Lotus Hall BMICH starting at 6.00 pm.

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