Unlikely sirens of the sea

By Allison Garoza in Sydney

They’re blubbery, whiskery, rotund and about as far removed from the lissom, nubile image of mermaids as you could get. But that’s exactly what dugongs were once mistaken for, according to folklore.

Dugongs, marine mammals from the order Sirenia, are said to have once lured female-starved sailors, giving rise to the mermaid myth.

“Its been passed down through folklore,” explains Stacy Ong, an Aquarist at the Sydney Aquarium where dugongs have been on display in the Mermaid Lagoon exhibit since December.

“From above, the curves of a dugong apparently looked like a woman to sailors.”

Today dugongs are better understood. Found in warm Indo-Pacific waters, dugongs can live up to 70 years and much like humans, reach sexually maturity between 10-17 years.

Dugongs share powerful swimming skills with their cousin, the manatee, which is found along the southeastern US, South America and tropical west Africa. Like another relative, the elephant, dugongs have tusks, though these are usually only exposed in older animals.

Despite their curvaceous form, the dugong’s primary diet is sea grass, Ong says.

It takes up to a week to digest a meal but a mature dugong can still weigh in at a hefty 400-500 kg.

For an animal often unflatteringly referred to as a sea-pig, the dugong’s portliness is its main defense. The thickest part of their body is their back, where there is more blubber.

This means the animals protect themselves from predators, like sharks, by simply turning their backs on them.

Yet for such a large animal, dugongs can move quickly when needed.

They can put on a burst of speed of 25 knots over short distances, says Janet Lanyon, a zoology lecturer at the University of Queensland.

“When we encounter dugongs in the wild, they are shy and tend to flee humans if approached.”

Dugongs may be able to flee humans in the water, but they can’t flee the devastating effects of urbanisation.

More than 80,000 dugongs inhabit Australian waters, making the continent home to the world’s largest dugong population, according to the Sydney Aquarium.

Still, dugongs are currently listed as vulnerable to extinction by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Their population off Queensland’s urban coast has decreased by 90 per cent over the last 30 years, the aquarium says.

Habitat destruction, entanglements in fishing nets and litter, indigenous hunting, and injury caused by motorboats have wreaked havoc on wild populations.

And since dugongs only give birth every five to seven years, population growth is relatively slow.

Experts like Lanyon and Ong say conservation and habitat preservation are necessary to ensure the original mermaids will be around to mystify future generations.

But would the nien of today be fooled by these unlikely sirens?

Adam, a recent visitor to Sydney Aquarium from the UK, thought it would take a stretch of the imagination.

“They do have a bit of facial hair,” he said.
POPULAR: Crowds of people visit the Sydney Aquarium to meet the dugong which is a part of the Dugong At Mermaid Lagoon exhibition.