

Smart Stuff

with Twig Walkingstick



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OHIO AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH
AND DEVELOPMENT CENTER

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Notes: Sources included "How the Great Northern Sea-cow Became Exterminated" by Leonhard Stejneger in *The American Naturalist*, 1887. (Great northern sea-cow being the Steller's sea cow's old name.) Also check out Hans Rothauscher's excellent Steller's sea cow Web site, <http://www.hans-rothauscher.de/steller/seacow.htm>; and the FAQ page of Sirenian International, <http://www.sirenian.org/sirenians.html>. (Sirenians — "sy-REE-nee-enz" — being another name for sea cows, dugongs and manatees.) Especially cool at that second site is a poster of Earth's four living sirenian species (all of them listed as threatened, however) alongside the way-bigger Steller's sea cow.

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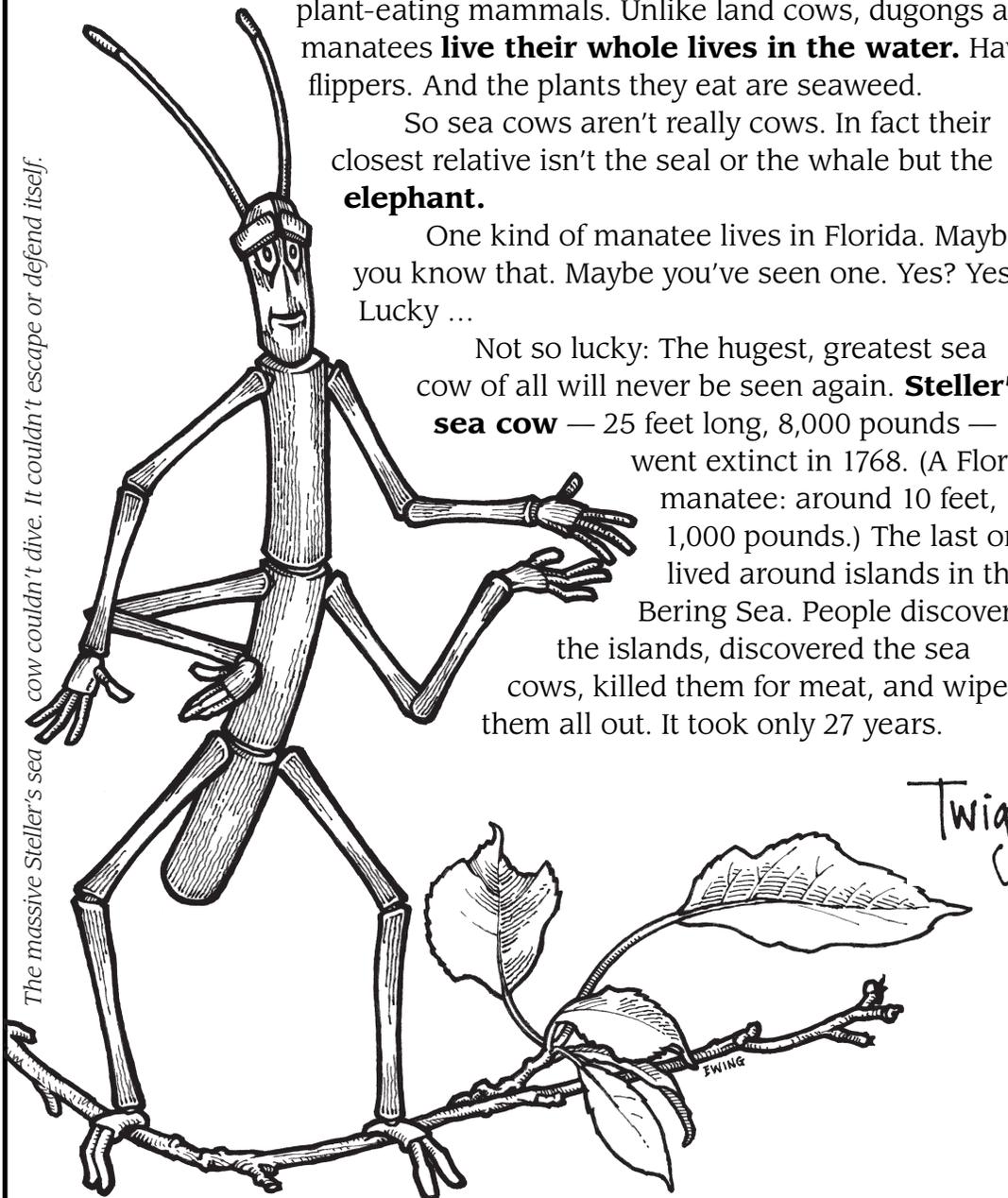
Q. Dear Twig: What's a sea cow?

A. "Sea cow" is another name for animals called **dugongs** and **manatees**. Like land cows, dugongs and manatees are big, peaceable, plant-eating mammals. Unlike land cows, dugongs and manatees **live their whole lives in the water**. Have flippers. And the plants they eat are seaweed.

So sea cows aren't really cows. In fact their closest relative isn't the seal or the whale but the **elephant**.

One kind of manatee lives in Florida. Maybe you know that. Maybe you've seen one. Yes? Yes? Lucky ...

Not so lucky: The hugest, greatest sea cow of all will never be seen again. **Steller's sea cow** — 25 feet long, 8,000 pounds — went extinct in 1768. (A Florida manatee: around 10 feet, 1,000 pounds.) The last ones lived around islands in the Bering Sea. People discovered the islands, discovered the sea cows, killed them for meat, and wiped them all out. It took only 27 years.



The massive Steller's sea cow couldn't dive. It couldn't escape or defend itself.

From your scientific friends at The Ohio State University — specifically, the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center (www.oardc.ohio-state.edu) and OSU Extension (extension.osu.edu).