

## How did stories about mermaids start?

1 A mermaid is a beautiful woman with the tail of a fish. Long ago, lonely men at sea told stories about seeing mermaids. But what they probably saw was a sea cow, or manatee.

2 A manatee might look like a mermaid from far away. It has short front legs shaped like paddles. They might be mistaken for arms. A mother manatee holds her baby in these "arms."

3 You certainly wouldn't mistake a manatee for a mermaid after a closer look. It's hard to call this sea animal beautiful. It has a square face and gray skin. Short hairs stick out here and there. The manatee's huge body ends in a rounded tail. It can be more than 13 feet long and weigh up to 3,500 pounds.

4 Some old stories say that mermaids are harmful. But manatees hurt no animal or person. They just eat plants. When they eat, you can hear the noise 200 yards away. Because manatees are both friendly and slow, they are easy to catch. Some are killed for their meat, oil, and skin. Others are run over by boats. If manatees aren't better protected, they may soon be found only in stories, just like mermaids.



