

### **The Project**

The West African manatee (*Trichechus senegalensis*) is found in shallow coastal waters, slow-moving rivers, estuaries, and some lakes along the Atlantic coast of Africa, from the Senegal River in the north to the Cuanza River (in Angola) in the south. It has also been recorded as far inland — 2,000 km from the sea — as the Niger River, from Koulikoro to Gao, and Lake Debo in Mali and Lakes Léré and Tréné in Chad. The species is listed as vulnerable in the IUCN Red Data Book and is legally protected by national legislation throughout its range. However, enforcement of such legislation has not been effective, and it is believed that the West African manatee population has drastically declined and that several local populations have even been extirpated due to subsistence hunting, incidental entanglement in fishing nets and habitat modification. Very little is known about the distribution and the biology of the species and until fairly recently, the species was among the “forgotten” marine mammals. Only a handful of scientists have attempted to carry out preliminary studies on the distribution and the biology of the West African manatees thus, there is still much research needed to provide adequate management for the species over the continent.

The manatee conservation and education project in Côte d’Ivoire was set up in 1986, by the Wildlife Conservation Society, headquartered in New York, in collaboration with the Ivorian Ministry of Water and Forests to gather basic information on the biology and status of the West African manatee and develop and implement a long-term management strategy for manatees in their most important habitats. The project was established in response to a recommendation from the IUCN/Sirenian Specialist Group to improve management of the sirenian populations, particularly the least known such as the West African manatee, with the aim of promoting their protection and recovery. Hence, the project has conservation implications well beyond the borders of the study area in southern Côte d’Ivoire.

The distribution of manatees on the entire coastal area of Côte d’Ivoire has been mapped from 1986 to 1990 and six different habitats has been identified of which the lagoon complexes of Grand-Lahou and Fresco (about 300 ha) linked together by the Fresco canal was found to be the most important (see study area maps in Appendix I). The project has shown that the total numbers of manatees still surviving in Côte d’Ivoire were well below 750-800 individuals severely persecuted for their meat and that manatees should be, therefore, regarded as an extremely endangered species in Côte d’Ivoire. Data obtained from 18 manatees tracked from April 2000 to present in the coastal lagoons has shown that the West African manatee spent its time resting, moving, feeding and cavorting and that time spent in different activities was highly correlated to period of the day, seasons of the year and tidal stages and that different parts of the lagoon system are used for each of these activities.