

Janet Lanyon- a personal tribute



I first met Janet Lanyon at the University of Queensland in 1983, in what proved to be a life-changing chance encounter for both of us. She dropped into the office of Professor Michael Bryden, an anatomist and eminent marine mammalogist, to enquire about opportunities to undertake a PhD on marine mammals in Queensland. I was also visiting Mike, and he referred Janet to me.

My first impression was of a very young woman- Janet looked much younger than her years even then- dressed entirely in white with long blonde hair. Within minutes, however, it was clear that Janet was no romantic idealist drawn to marine mammals for sentimental reasons. She had already undertaken impressive research on the digestive biology of koalas and was asking thoughtful, technically sophisticated questions. Her work immediately caught my attention because dugongs have often been described as the "marine koala". Although the two species occupy very different environments, they share remarkably similar digestive physiology as specialised herbivores.

That conversation changed the direction of Janet's career. She retained her Monash University PhD scholarship and Professor Gordon Sanson as her principal supervisor, while I became a co-supervisor and her research shifted to the nutritional ecology of dugongs. Janet spent extended periods in Townsville collecting data before completing the writing of her thesis in Melbourne.

Those years provided many memorable experiences. In the 1980s, dugong carcasses were unfortunately common on Townsville beaches because animals frequently became entangled in shark nets and commercial fishing gear. Janet and I spent many hours conducting beach necropsies under often challenging conditions. One occasion remains particularly vivid. We arrived at a well-known nude beach carrying buckets filled with dissecting knives to examine a stranded dugong. The beach was occupied by several naked, male sunbathers who, on seeing us approach with our equipment, disappeared within seconds, leaving us with an unexpectedly private workplace. It was a story we both enjoyed retelling.

I also assisted with Janet's ingenious study of dugong gut passage rates. In the mid-1980s, I travelled to Jakarta to work with captive dugongs. Janet was unable to make the trip for

personal reasons. Armed with meticulous instructions from Janet, I fed coloured beads to the two captive dugongs and, with the enthusiastic assistance of my teenage sons, patiently searched the putrid dugong holding pools each day until beads ceased to reappear in their faeces. For many years afterwards, if you searched for my sons' names online, one of the first results was the acknowledgements in Janet's paper thanking them for their unusual contribution to science.

After completing her PhD, Janet joined the University of Queensland, where she established what became the world's most important long-term studies of wild dugongs in Moreton Bay, near Brisbane. No other location combines such large dugong populations, clear water and proximity to a major research university. Janet recognised this unique opportunity and built an extraordinary longitudinal study of individually recognised animals that has generated fundamental insights into dugong biology, genetics, physiology, health and conservation.

Janet started catching and sampling dugongs around 30 years ago and formed a health assessment program formally in 2008 running it successfully almost every year since then, except for some covid years. She started with a small team of volunteers, many of whom still actively contribute to the field work. Janet had a special way of making every person on her team feel involved, included and valued. Her kindness, humour, exceptional teamwork skills and genuine care for the program and volunteers are the reason why the program continues to be so successful.

Janet's influence extended well beyond her research. She was an outstanding communicator and an inspiring teacher of undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Queensland. Through her enthusiasm, generosity and intellectual rigour, she trained and mentored generations of scientists who now contribute to conservation and marine science throughout Australia and internationally.

The last time I heard Janet speak was as a plenary lecturer at the Sirenian Workshop held during the 2024 Society for Marine Mammalogy's Biennial Conference in Perth. Her presentation, drawing on decades of work with dugongs, was both scientifically insightful and deeply engaging. It was a fitting demonstration of the curiosity, dedication and generosity that characterised her entire career.

Janet made an exceptional contribution to our understanding of dugongs and to the conservation of one of the world's most distinctive marine mammals. Her more than 90 scientific publications are a lasting record of this work.

Janet will be deeply missed by her family, friends, colleagues and former students. She will be remembered not only for her scientific achievements, but also for her warmth, humour, generosity and the many students and colleagues whose lives she enriched.

Long-term ecological studies such as the one Janet established in Moreton Bay become increasingly valuable with time, and I hope this remarkable research programme will continue. It deserves to stand as one of Janet's greatest scientific legacies, a lasting testament to her vision and her enduring contribution to marine mammal science.

Helene Marsh

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