

Is It or Isn't It a Marine Mammal?



General and ecological definitions: A “marine mammal” is any mammal species whose life depends upon the sea. That is, any mammal that lives in salt water and/or derives its food from a saltwater environment.

Taxonomic definition: The term “marine mammal” is defined as all the species in the following taxonomic orders: cetacea, pinnipedia and sirenia. In plain English, these are the whales, the seals, and the manatees.

Legal definition: In the U.S. legal system, the term “marine mammal” is defined by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). This act of Congress establishes special protection for marine mammals and defines that term as including all members of cetacea, pinnipedia and sirenia, as well as the polar bear and the sea otter (since these two members of the order Carnivora arguably depend entirely upon the sea as well).

For the most part, species included in the term “marine mammal” are the same regardless of which of the above definitions you use. But there are exceptions. An interesting way to explore this is to answer the following riddle: when is a marine mammal not a marine mammal?

For example, the Lake Baikal seal is a marine mammal taxonomically because it is a member of pinnipedia. But because the species is entirely isolated to the fresh waters of Lake Baikal in Siberia, it is not a marine mammal ecologically. It never encounters salt water and lives its entire life a thousand miles from the nearest ocean.

In another example, the sea otter is a marine mammal both ecologically and legally since it lives in the sea and is covered by the MMPA. However it is not a marine mammal taxonomically since it is not a whale, a seal or a manatee.



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