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Manatee with camera records grazing behaviour

To better understand the West Indian manatee, a PhD candidate is fitting the animals with underwater cameras. The study aims to see how the manatee, an endangered species, uses its habitat in the wild.

‘We hope to get comprehensive data for the first time on the West Indian manatee and its grazing behaviour,’ explains Fee Smulders, a PhD candidate at Aquatic Ecology and Water Quality Management. For instance, how do they move around during the day and what seagrass do they prefer to eat? ‘They will be mapping the seagrass area and we may discover new fields of seagrass.’

As a test, two manatees in Burgers’ Zoo

were fitted with underwater cameras with suction cups. ‘The controlled environment of the zoo lets us test how to get the best images and check the animals aren’t adversely affected by the camera,’ explains Smulders. ‘After discussing it with local experts in Mexico, we decided to attach the underwater cameras in the wild while the manatees are resting, at depths of about two metres. We can do that while snorkelling. We hope to start on this in July.’

In Burgers’ Zoo, the manatees swim in fresh water. The expectation is that in seawater, the camera will become detached after just one day and float to the surface. The researchers will be able to pick up the 10,000-euro camera with the aid of its GPS, a radio signal and its bright pink colour, fish it out of the waves and read off the data before using it again.

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