

Hugh Manatee

by

Richard Hack and Mark S. Meritt

Off the Florida coast where the Southbound birds fly,
Under seas just as clear as the afternoon sky,
Where the weather is hot more often than not
Lie a beautiful out-of-the-way little spot.

A lovely lagoon not too far from the shore,
Filled up with corals of colors galore.
Sea turtles and dolphins and fish shared the space
Where green grassy plants grew all over the place.

But by far the most carefree in this life of ease
Were the sea's gentle giants, the big manatees.
This story's about one known simply as Hugh,
Who did all the normal things manatees do.

With large snout and short fins and skin that was grey,
He slept and he ate for eight hours a day.
For sleeping the ocean's not quite up to par,
But undersea dining is strictly five-star.
It's the world's largest all-you-can-eat salad bar!

With these two jobs done, eight more hours remained
For Hugh and his friends to keep entertained.
They'd swim relay races and play hide-and-peek,
And sometimes they'd just float around for a week.

Now, one day while romping, behind rocks nearby
Hugh noticed a sparkling catching his eye.
And being real curious, not looking for trouble,
He started approaching the pile of rubble
And realized the sparkles weren't sparkles but bubbles.

The water got hotter the closer Hugh got,
And warm water's what manatees like a lot.
So he pressed further on, and you know what he found?
The bubbles burst up from a hole in the ground.

The soothing sensation that sprang from the spout
Was something no manatee should do without.
Deciding he had to deliver the news,
He reluctantly turned from his newfound jacuzzi.

He hurried straight home to assemble a meeting.
If he weren't so slow, he'd have been caught for speeding.
When all gathered 'round, Hugh cried out with glee,
"You have to come feel it! You have to come see!"
"See what?" asked the sea cows.
Hugh said, "Follow me!"

Now, some hesitated, but Hugh took control
And led all his friends to the bubbling hole.
And as they took turns in the warmth of the spray,
They shouted, "Three cheers for Hugh! Hip-hip-hooray!"

They all formed a line so the fun could begin.
And for days, when one came out, the next went right in.
Hugh grew impatient, but spoke with a grin:
"Why should we have to take turns with such fun?
If we find some more holes, we all could have one!"

A voice from the crowd asked, "How far will we go?"
It was Manny T. Manatee wondering so.
Hugh thought for a moment, then finally replied,
"As far as we have to! Who'll swim by my side!?"

"I will! Pick me!" cried the first volunteers.
But Manny T. Manatee still had some fears.
"What if we find nothing? What will we do?"
"We all needn't go, just a few," answered Hugh.

Hugh handpicked his team and they left on the mission.
And though they were all in the topmost condition,
Their progress was slow. They made no leaps and bounds,
'Cause it's tough to swim fast weighing two thousand pounds.

They trudged on for days, stopping only to feed,
When some dolphins swam by them at ten times their speed.
Hugh pondered a bit, then said, "I've got a notion...
We'll swim through the ocean in dolphin-like motion!"

The group thought about what makes dolphins unique.
"They bob up and down," one said. "Sometimes they squeak."
So they all tried out each of these two qualities,
But try as they might, they were still manatees.

Hugh thought and he thought and at last figured out,
"There's something we're missing - a long pointy snout!"
With the help of some kelp Hugh attached a conch shell
To Manny's flat nose, hoping this might propel.

So Manny swam forth, and though he tried his best,
The nose didn't help him, as you might have guessed.
After all that they'd tried, Hugh then swallowed his pride.
"We will always be slow, sluggish sea cows," Hugh cried.
"The one thing left to do is to grab a free ride!"

Hugh ripped all the kelp off of Manny's fake nose,
And soon fashioned several dolphin lassos.
Manny asked, "Is it fair to just simply hang on?"
But before he had finished, his friends had all gone.

So Manny gave in, and he rode dolphin-back,
And in no time at all, he caught up with the pack.
With almost no effort their progress had doubled.
Before they could blink, they found more holes that bubbled.

Hugh knew they must test all these holes they'd discovered,
So each swam to one and above them they hovered.
They found that these geysers were second to none,
So they darted back home to inform everyone.

When they reached the lagoon, they caused such a sensation.
No one had seen dolphins used for transportation.
But bigger concerns had them anxiously wading
To find out if Hugh's news was worth celebrating.

Hugh happily said what they hoped they would hear,
Leaving Hugh having to shout right over their cheers.
"If we look hard enough, we can find even more!
It is time that we all realized what's in store.
We must go where no manatee has gone before!"

So each manatee found their own dolphin to grab,
And when dolphins ran out, they used shark, squid and crab.
Manny wondered again, "Aren't we being selfish?"
When someone said, "Man, chill out. Hop on a shellfish!"

So Hugh led the search as they journeyed the sea,
And at each hole they found they left one manatee.
When they'd been everywhere, Hugh began to have doubts.
It seemed manatees outnumbered bubbling spouts.

When they ran out of geysers which naturally sprayed,
Hugh said, "Maybe holes can be manatee-made.
We'd make so many holes that we all would have one!"
But, of course, Manny wondered, "How could it be done?"

Hugh took a good look at their transporting creatures
And saw in a few of them promising features.
He spotted a hammerhead shark which he snatched,
And to it an electrical eel he attached.

The shark started bouncing his head up and down,
And Hugh aimed its hammer straight down at the ground.
The electrical eel was providing the fuel
To turn the shark into Hugh's first power tool.

The sand flew about in a great misty cloud,
And the sound of the pounding shark's head got real loud.
The manatees wondered just what Hugh had planned,
As Hugh and the shark disappeared in the sand.

For a while there was nothing to see or to hear,
But at last from the cloud one small bubble appeared.
Then a few, then a slew, then a million and two,
And on top of the stream sat a triumphant Hugh!

The sea cows applauded and cheered with delight,
But Manny T. said, "What we're doing's not right!
Why, I am more shocked than even the shark.
And what's more, the once brightly lit eel has gone dark!"

But the rest were impressed so with Hugh's new invention,
They failed to pay Manny T. any attention.
So some grabbed a shark, while the rest took swordfishes,
And made enough holes to fulfill all their wishes.

For every last manatee, life was so sweet
As they slept and they ate and they played in the heat.

They even got Manny to play right along,
Until one day he noticed that something seemed wrong.

Now manatees aren't only slow as molasses,
Their vision's so poor that they ought to have glasses.
But though Manny's eyesight was not all too keen,
He saw that the sea was no longer so clean.

He felt on his body a thin, dusty layer,
And the gray of his skin had become even grayer.
The blue sea around him had gotten less bright,
So the daytime seemed almost as dark as the night.

Not so long ago, Manny barely would need
To swim out of his geyser to eat some seaweed.
But nowadays he travelled far for his meal,
And the scrawny plants he'd find had little appeal.

All these things puzzled Manny right down to the core.
Just why should they be so much worse than before?
He thought and he thought, then he finally concluded,
The bubbling holes made the water polluted.

Although he knew his friends would not share his views,
He was certain he had to tell someone the news.
Go straight to the top, that is what he would do.
They might ignore him, but they'd listen to Hugh.

Manny said, "Sure, these bubbles surround us with heat,
But the goo that they spew leaves us little to eat.
All these plants that we love need the sun's brilliant rays,
But the sun cannot shine through this thick, murky haze."

"It's the holes," Manny said, "We've drilled more than our fill.
We have to do something, 'cause no one else will.
Everybody must help. There's no time to be lazy.
By working together, we'll clear up what's hazy."
But Hugh's only comment was, "Manny, you're crazy."

Poor Manny was dumbstruck. His bubble was burst.
But then suddenly things took a turn for the worse.
All the bubbling holes started to sputter and cough,
And with one final burp every spout shut right off.

The bubbles were gone. They'd used every last one.
Now not even the holes warmed them, much less the sun.
Manny started to say, "See, I knew this would happen,"
But nobody heard. They were too busy yappin'.

"I'm hungry! I'm cold!" cried untold manatees.
"Unless we find some warm water, we'll surely freeze!"
Disappointed but brave, Hugh once more took the lead.
And struck out on a search for a warm place to feed.

It seemed like forever they searched for their dinner,
And even huge Hugh had begun getting thinner.
They scraped and they scrounged and they scavanged around,
But all that they found were their holes in the ground.

All the turtles and dolphins and fish left no trace.
The great ocean became a cold, dark, lonely place.
Their hope, like the ocean, was no longer lit.
Even Hugh gave into his desire to quit.

So the manatees all reached the end of their rope,
When a light through the haze gave a glimmer of hope.
They approached this bright spot, and by catching a glance,
They found crystal clear water and green grassy plants.

The corals and sand were so bright they were shining,
But no one could see. They were too busy dining.
They all were so starving they just dove right in,
But when Manny looked 'round, with a fin to his chin,
He felt sure they were somewhere they'd already been.

Manny then recognized a familiar sand dune,
And he knew they'd come back to their own home lagoon.
He breathed sighs of relief. Waves of joy filled his heart.
Now back where they began, they could make a fresh start.

They had got in hot water because of their greed.
Manny knew they must learn to take just what they need.
So once more, he set out to tell what lie ahead,
But before he could speak, he heard Hugh's voice instead.

"Wait a minute! Stop eating!" Hugh begged of his friends.
"This is our own lagoon. This is where our greed ends.
These may well be the last of the plants we adore.
If we finish them now, there may never be more."

"We should take," Hugh went on, "only what we deserve.
Take a bit, leave the rest. Learn to share and conserve.
If we do, everything will get better, you'll find,
For the plants and the fish and all manatee-kind."

Hugh's complete change of heart made Manny so proud.
All alone Manny clapped, and Hugh modestly bowed.
But then someone joined in, then two manatees more,
And soon everyone clapped in a thunderous roar.

So the manatees all chose to turn a new leaf,
Much to Manny's and Hugh's and the ocean's relief.
And though it took time, as these things often do,
The dark waters cleared up and the sunlight shone through.

The green grassy plants grew again where they'd grown,
And the turtles and dolphins and fish came back home.
Soon enough all was beautiful, just as before,
A lagoon filled with corals of colors galore.

And the manatees found one of life's greatest treasures
Was learning to value the simplest of pleasures.
They'd sleep, eat, and play everyday through and through,
And were happy the way that they were. Even Hugh.