Legend of the Mermaid
by Kelly Hashway

We’ve all heard of mermaids. They are the beautiful half-human, half-fish creatures that live in the sea. They have the head and torso of a human and the tail of a fish. We also know that mermaids only exist in fairy tales. But where did all the stories about these creatures come from? If you have ever seen a manatee, then you might have an idea.

Manatees, which are also called sea cows, are mammals that live in the ocean. Since they are mammals, they have to swim up to the surface to breathe air. Many people believe that the legend of the mermaid began with sailors who witnessed the manatees popping their heads out of the water to breathe. Because manatees can stand in the water, a sailor might mistake the manatee for a creature that is half-human, half-fish.

Mermaids are described as having long flowing hair. This is probably because manatees like to swim up to the surface of the water in areas where there is seaweed. Manatees eat all kinds of vegetation, including sea grass. The seaweed surrounding the manatee’s head when they eat could give the impression of long hair.

Manatees also have powerful tails that are very similar to the fish-like tail of a mermaid. Sailors probably watched manatees come up for air and then swim back below the surface, using their paddle-shaped tails. This would explain why sailors thought mermaids had fish-like tails.

Another similarity between the manatee and the mermaid is how they hold their young. Manatees cradle their babies in their flippers just like people hold their children in their arms. So it is easy to see human traits in manatees and how they just might have led to the legend of the mermaid.
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1. What is a manatee?
   a. a large, gray fish that lives in the ocean
   b. a large, gray fish that lives in lakes
   c. a large, gray mammal that lives in the ocean
   d. another word for mermaid

2. Three Reasons Ancient Sailors May Have Mistaken Manatees for Mermaids
   I   ________________________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________________________
   II  ________________________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________________________
   III ________________________________________________________________________________

3. Which sentence is an opinion?
   a. Mermaids exist only in fairy tales.
   b. Manatees eat all kinds of vegetation, including sea grass.
   c. Manatees need to swim to the surface of the water for air.
   d. Mermaids are beautiful creatures.

4. What is the author’s purpose for writing this passage?
   a. to compare and contrast mermaids and manatees
   b. to persuade you to believe in mermaids
   c. to describe how mermaids live
   d. to entertain you with a story about a mermaid who lived long ago
Legend of the Mermaid

The words below are scrambled vocabulary words from the passage. Unscramble each word and write it on the line.

1. t a a m
   n e e
   ___________________________
   Clue: a large, gray sea animal that breathes air

2. d e g
   n l e
   ___________________________
   Clue: unproven story told through time

3. s t o r
   ___________________________
   Clue: Please log in or register to download the printable version of this worksheet.

4. g e i o v
   l t t e a n
   ___________________________
   Clue: plant life

5. l e a d
   d c r
   ___________________________
   Clue: hold gently

6. s p p l
   r e f i
   ___________________________
   Clue: flat limbs on sea animals used for swimming
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2. Three Reasons Ancient Sailors May Have Mistaken Manatees for Mermaids
   I. They pop their heads out of the water to breathe. From a distance, sailors may have thought the heads look human-like.
   II. Manatee heads were often surrounded by seaweed. This may have looked like long, flowing hair.
   III. Manatees have powerful fish-like tails like mermaids.

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1. t a a m n e e  manatee
   Clue: a large, gray sea animal that breathes air

2. d e g n l e  legend
   Clue: unproven story told through time

3. s t o r  torso
   Clue: part of the human body that does not include arms, legs, or head

4. g e i o v t t e a n  vegetation
   Clue: plant life

5. l e a d c r  cradle
   Clue: hold gently

6. s p p l r e f i  flippers
   Clue: flat limbs on sea animals used for swimming