



Seahorse

Seahorses are found in tropical and temperate waters, usually in the shallow weedy areas close to the coast, such as Ningaloo Reef. There are about 50 different species of seahorse worldwide, ranging in size from 1 to 20cms in length, and up to 25 of these are found in Australian waters. One of the species found in the Ningaloo Marine Park is the Western Australian Seahorse (*Hippocampus angustus*).

Seahorses have unique body structures for a marine animal. They swim in an upright manner, relying mainly on their dorsal fin to move through the water, which flutters up to 35 times per second! Although it appears as though they have scales, they actually have an exo-skeleton made up of bony plates fused together with flesh. Seahorses have a prehensile tail, which they use to hang onto seaweed. Highly skilled at camouflaging, seahorses match their surroundings by expanding and contracting pigments in their skin. They are also able to grow weed-like appendages on their body called cirri, which help their bodies to camouflage. All seahorses have a coronet on top of their head, which is unique to each animal, similar to a human fingerprint.

Seahorses feed on plankton and small crustaceans such as brine shrimp. They are surprisingly ravenous eaters, and use their elongated snouts to draw in their food similar to a vacuum cleaner. A seahorse fry (juvenile seahorse) may consume around 3000 brine shrimp a day, and adults will have around 30-50 meals a day! Their snouts are able to search in and get food out of places such as cracks in, or underneath rocks. However, seahorses are not able to chew what they find for food. Instead, they allow the food to disintegrate as they eat it.

The mating behavior in this animal is quite incredible. Their mating ritual includes intertwining their tails whilst swimming, and engaging in a courtship dance where the male will shoot jets of water from his pouch to show that it is empty. This dance can last for up to 8 hours, and males often court females for several days before actually mating. Male seahorses have a pouch on their ventral side. The female seahorse deposits her eggs into this pouch, in which the male will then fertilise the eggs. Strangely, the male is the one in the partnership who carries the unborn young for 10-25 days, after which he releases up to 2000 tiny seahorses into the water. Despite the large number born at a time, less than 1% of eggs will live to adulthood.

Did you know?

Seahorses are threatened by harvesting (for use in aquariums or Asian medicine), habitat destruction, and pollution. Because they are hard to find in the wild, population sizes may not be well-known for many species.