

## Seahorses and Seadragons

A seahorse is not a horse that lives in the sea. It's a fish that has a long tail, bent neck and long snout. Its called a seahorse because it's head looks like a horse. As a fish, it has something very few fish have - a neck! It also has a backbone, so it is called a vertebrate animal.

Seahorses have three main fins to help it stay upright, and a tiny one at the bottom of it's body. Despite all those fins, it's a pretty poor distance swimmer. Unless it hitches a ride on something else using its tail, it will stay within the same 3 ft square all its life.

Seahorses like to live in tropical areas fairly close to the surface of the ocean in grass beds, mangrove tree roots and coral reefs. Living near coral, seagrass and sea sponges provides shelter for them as well as helps them camouflage. Like the octopus, they can change color so they can hide in small places.

There are about 53 different kinds of seahorses and seadragons ranging in size from 1/2 inch to 14 inches. A seadragon looks like a seahorse that got stuck in a bunch of kelp. Like fish, they have a swim bladders to keep them buoyant in the water and gills on either side of their head to breathe. Unlike fish, they have a spiny and bony body that makes them difficult for other fish to eat. The result is that they don't have many natural predators. Who eats seahorses? Birds, sharks, rays and crabs.

Seahorses don't have teeth or even a stomach. Because they don't have a stomach, food passes directly through their digestive system. That means they must constantly be eating by sucking up food through their snout as they float along. They will eat just about anything small enough to fit through their mouth, like tiny shrimp, baby fish, plankton, and other small organisms.

A seahorses tail is not just ornamental. They use their tails to cling to seagrass, coral, weeds when they need to rest. It also helps them dance with their partner during courtship and mating. They sometimes even hold their partners tail just so they don't lose each other.

Lots of seahorses stay with the same partner for one or more breeding seasons. Every morning, the seahorse couples dances to greet each other and confirm their bond.

Like sea dragons, male seahorses get pregnant instead of the females. The female puts the eggs in a special pouch and the male fertilizes them. Seahorse embryos take two to four weeks to develop before they are birthed. Once they are released, they are on their own and have to fend for themselves and survive from predators.

Seahorses are in danger of becoming extinct because of human activity. They are used as food, aquarium pets, souvenirs, lucky charms, jewelry and in traditional medicine in Asia. Pollution and overfishing also affect their population negatively. See the video at <https://youtu.be/vF78uzl9-Ew>