



Humphead Wrasse

Cheilinus undulatus

Range /Habitat

- Occurs in the Indo-Pacific region from the Red Sea to South Africa and the Tuamoto Islands, north to the Ryukyu Islands, and south to New Caledonia.
- Found in steep outer reef slopes, channel slopes and lagoon reefs.
- Juvenile inhabits coral-rich areas of lagoon reefs where staghorn, or *Acropora*, corals abound. Also in algae reefs or sea grasses.
- Adult roves across the reefs by day and rests in reef caves and under coral ledges at night.

Physical Characteristics

- Develops thick lips and a prominent bulbous hump on its forehead.
- Juvenile is a pale greenish color with elongate dark spots on its scales which tends to form a bar. It often has two black lines that run from behind the eyes.
- Like many members of the wrasse family, it rarely moves its tail for locomotion but rather flaps its pectoral fins to swim.
- Can grow to a maximum size of 7.5 feet (2.3 m) and reach weights as large as 421 lbs. (191 kg).
- Life span is about 30 years.

Diet/Feeding

- Diet consists of mollusks, fish, sea urchins, crustaceans, and other invertebrates.
- One of the few predators of toxic animals such as sea hares, boxfishes and crown-of-thorns starfish.
- Can extend its jaws out in front of its snout, pulling prey out of reef holes and crevices and other hideaway positions.
- Also hunts concealed prey by biting off coral branches and tables or blowing jets of water aimed at the substrate to uncover hidden animals. If an escaping prey dives under a rock on the reef, the wrasse turns over the rock with its powerful jaws.

Reproduction and Growth

- After the wrasse becomes an adult, it is called an “initial phase” male or female. Those that were born male will always remain as an initial phase male and will never have a chance to be a dominant male. Adult females will sometimes change into males. These males and remaining females are also called initial phase wrasses, but some of the larger females will become “supermales.” This happens when a current supermale dies. The supermale is larger than all the other males and has distinct colors and patterns on its skin. This coloration attracts females to the supermale. Sex change in wrasses ensures there will be a male to reproduce with females.
- Mating is generally conducted by the supermale. It will find a specific place on the reef and chase off all other suitors and then mate with the large group of females that gather. This is useful for the species, but also somewhat detrimental as some fishermen are tracking the mating areas and times in order to pull in as many of the fish as possible.

Conservation Status

- “Endangered” on the IUCN Red List.



Additional Information

- Usually solitary but may occur in pairs.
- It is estimated that less than one percent of these animals reach maturity as males because the fish can spontaneously switch sex from female to male.
- Delicacies in Asia, particularly in Hong Kong where it has become fashionable to eat colorful reef fishes which are killed just prior to preparing them for dinner. Many high-end restaurants keep such wrasses in large aquariums to entice diners who will pay nearly \$250 USD for a plate of the humphead wrasse's lips and over \$10,000 USD for an entire animal.
- Under heavy fishing pressure at the center of its range in southeastern Asia where its coral reef habitat is most abundant, and particularly in key supply countries for the live reef fish trade, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as Palawan, in the Philippines. All available fishery-dependent and trade-related data from these areas suggest declines in the numbers over 10 to 15 years in exploited areas of 10-fold or more, with the fish now considered rare in areas where it was once common.

Sources

www.fishbase.org

www.sheddaquarium.org

<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/4592>