# GEORGIA AQUARIUM ANIMAL FACT SHEET

### Flathead mullet

Mugil cephalus

#### Range/Habitat

- The flathead or "striped" mullet occurs globally in subtropical and warm temperate seas. It is common in the eastern Pacific, specifically southern California to Chile. It also is very common in Florida waters and is found as far north as Cape Cod.
- This mullet tends to inhabit inshore marine waters, estuaries and lagoons, although some adults travel upstream into rivers. In the sea, it is found at depths to about 394 feet (120 m).
- The flathead mullet forms schools over sand, mud bottoms and dense vegetation. As a larger adult, it is often seen swimming at the surface of clear water, above the reefs.

## **Physical Characteristics**

- This mullet is olive-silver in color along the back, white below, with silver-sides. The edge of the caudal (tail) fin is usually black.
- It is sometimes referred to as the "striped mullet" due to its faint brownish-grey stripes that follow the centers of the scale rows along the body.
- It has a small triangular mouth with a blunt snout and an elongate, cylindrical body. Most of its eyes are covered by a transparent, fatty (adipose) tissue.
- This species commonly reaches about 14 inches (35 cm), although any individual longer than about 19 inches (50 cm) is unusual. The largest individual reported was 47 inches (120 cm) long.

#### Diet/Feeding

- The flathead mullet eats detrital material and fine algae. It occasionally consumes fish eggs, insects at the water's surface and plankton.
- While feeding, it sifts its food with its fine, specialized gill rakers and expels inorganic sediment through its gill openings or back out through its mouth.
- Its stomach acts as a grinding organ to aid digestion along with a thick-walled muscular gizzard.

#### **Conservation Status**

• The flathead mullet is not on the IUCN Red List.

#### **Additional Information**

- The flathead mullet commonly forms schools of several hundred fish.
- Individuals can be seen jumping out of the water at random. This behavior is unexplained.
- Adult mullet swim offshore in schools to spawn, usually at night, and then return to inshore brackish and freshwater areas. The fry and juveniles live in estuaries and sheltered bays and lagoons, feeding on plankton, until they are sexually mature.
- Younger mullet are an important prey for larger fishes, birds, and various aquatic mammals.
- This mullet is an important commercial species in many parts of the world. It is widely cultured in freshwater ponds in Southeast Asia.

- The oldest known mullet-related fossils date back 30 40 million years and were found in Poland and the Ukraine.
- The flathead mullet is also referred to as 'ama'ama by Hawaiians, as this fish was an important part of their islands' ancient history. The Hawaiians gave these mullet different names to correspond with the fish's growth stages. The small juvenile fish were referred to as pua'ama'ama and were caught with nets along the shores then released into manmade, rock-walled ponds to control and grow for future food.

#### **Sources**

Encyclopedia of Fishes, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Paxton, J. R. et al., pg. 192
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