

Seahorse

There are over 47 species of seahorse. Seahorses are found worldwide in shallow waters including around the UK's coastline. Rare short-snouted seahorses have been found in the Thames Estuary. If you were a seahorse in which ocean would you live in? What would you do if you had to find somewhere new to live? If you met a fisherman, what would you say to them?

Little known facts on the Seahorse

- Seahorses swim upright using a dorsal fin, which they rapidly flutter to propel them, in order to move them forward. Their pectoral fins are located behind their eyes and used to steer.
- Seahorses have a coronet on their head, which is unique to each seahorse, much like a human fingerprint.
- They have prehensile tails, which can be used to grip objects and as an anchor.
- They have long snouts, which they use to suck up food, and eyes that can move independently of each other, much like a chameleon.
- Seahorses typically mate for life. The female deposits eggs into a male pouch, which he then fertilizes. He later gives birth to live young, called fry. Seahorses are the only animals where the male carries and gives birth to young.

But why are Seahorses important?

- Worldwide seahorse populations are endangered by over-fishing and habitat destruction resulting from human activity and climate change.
- The number of fry released by the male seahorse averages 100-200 for most species. However fewer than five young out of every 1,000 born reach adulthood.
- The seahorse is used in traditional Chinese medicine, with as many as 20 million seahorses caught from the wild each year and sold for this purpose.
- In the UK, the seahorse species *Hippocampus hippocampus* is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.
- Seahorses are usually found in shallow muddy waters, estuaries or seagrass beds. Their presence in the Thames is a sign of good water quality. They are also found on the Isles of Scilly.

How climate change will affect Seahorses

- Seahorses are physically delicate and susceptible to subtle changes in water temperature. They are therefore very good environmental indicators of changes in water quality.
- Warming waters causes a loss of habitats that are suitable for seahorses, such as sponge gardens, soft corals and sea grasses. In areas where coral reefs are in decline seahorses have been found living in shark nets.
- Over the winter seahorses migrate out deeper waters that are 18 – 20 degrees Celsius.
- Seahorses are poor swimmers due to their upright bodies. This means that they are unable to move away quickly in response to deteriorating environmental conditions.
- This makes the seahorse more susceptible than other marine life to an increase in global temperature.

The world without Seahorses

Seahorses have featured in mythology and folklore throughout history and are seen as holding magical powers by the Chinese. This is why they are harvested for Chinese medicine.

Their unique looks, slow movement and ability to change colour in order to blend in with any background make them incredibly beautiful sea creatures.

