



Reef Fish

The protected habitat that the Ningaloo Reef provides is occupied by about 500 different species of fish. These fish range from tiny Damsels, and blue Pullers to the largest fish in the ocean- the famous Whale Shark. Ningaloo Reef is incredibly unique, as some of the species of fish are not found anywhere else in the world.

The coral reef and the fish of Ningaloo have a very close relationship with one another. The reef forms a protected area so that the fish can feed freely on the coral and dash into crevices when predators approach. The reef fish are able to live and reproduce because of this protection. The coral provides a feeding ground for the reef fish, which have a diet of phytoplankton, zooplankton, and smaller fish, all of which live within the confines and safety of the reef.

Living in a salt-water environment means fish must drink water through their mouth, but excrete salt through their gills in a highly concentrated form. Their gills have a large surface area, which makes them very efficient at taking up oxygen from the water. Reef fish are affected by the rise in sea temperature because as the temperature of the water rises, less oxygen will dissolve into the ocean, making it more difficult for fish to respire. As coral is such an important part of their ecosystem, coral bleaching has an enormous effect on reef fish, lessening the availability of food.

The question of why coral reef fish are so colourful has received much attention over the years and yet still remains largely unresolved. One possible explanation is that reef fish live in an extremely colourful environment amongst the coral. With pink, yellow, green and blue backgrounds, the fish must be the same bright colours in order to camouflage and inconspicuously escape predators. Another possible explanation is that reef fish need to be able to distinguish their own species from another, so the bright, easily recognizable colours and patterns allow the fish to have an identity. This makes mating and identifying potential partners much easier.

Most fish are very territorial, so they stay within a certain area of reef for their entire life. This is particularly common amongst the smaller species of fish. Some species of reef fish are almost always seen in pairs, which includes most Butterflyfish. This species, as well as others are extremely loyal to their partners and will mate for life.

When snorkeling or diving through Ningaloo Reef you are sure to find many striking fish, including the bright and intricately patterned Wrasse, the delicate Butterflyfish shaped like disks, the tiny glowing Damsels, the beautiful Parrotfish with their beak-like mouths, the strange long and thin Flutemouths, the comical Clownfish in their anemones and of course the breathtaking Whale Sharks- the gentle giants of the ocean. Each species is wonderfully unique. The ecosystem that exists around the Ningaloo coral reef has one of the highest species densities on earth- certainly an ecosystem worth protecting.

Did you know?

Many species of fish change colour and shape as they grow from being a juvenile to an adult fish, and the majority of reef fish species have the ability to change their sex.