



SEA SNAKE

Sea snakes are very diverse, with 22 species of sea snake just in Western Australia, and around 70 species in the world. Two species are endemic to West Australian reefs, and these are the Short-nosed, and Leaf-scaled sea snakes. They mainly live in the warmer waters of the Indian Ocean and west Pacific Ocean, but can be found in a variety of habitats from mangroves, estuaries, reefs, or the open ocean. Sea snakes are usually underwater for about half an hour at a time, but have the ability to hold their breath for around two hours, with some diving to depths of up to 100 metres.

Each species of sea snake varies in size and colour, but all have the same general body shape. Their bodies are streamlined for movement through the water- long and thin. The tail of a sea snake is flattened like a paddle, and is used for propelling the snake as it swims. Sea snakes breathe air when they come to the surface through two nostrils at the top of their snout. To stop water from getting into their lungs, these nostrils have valves that close when they dive underwater. They also need a mechanism to get rid of the salt that enters their bodies from the saltwater. The gland under their tongue concentrates and excretes the salt from their body.

Sea snakes have been divided into two groups depending on their feeding tactics. One group is the 'bottom feeders', which includes those that will dive to very deep water (approximately 100 metres below sea level) to hunt for prey such as fish eggs, fish, and eels. The other group is called the 'pelagic feeders' which are those that feed on the surface of the ocean, drifting with the currents. These animals rely heavily on stealth when hunting because they are relatively slow at swimming. Their fangs inject venom that causes paralysis, and they swallow their prey whole.

Sea snakes reproduce every 8-10 years in most species, and they only give birth to 2 to 4 hatchlings at a time. These animals reproduce internally, but there are two different ways they can give birth. The method they use depends on the species. The first method is that the young is nourished by a placenta, and they birth to live young in the ocean. The second method is where the sea snakes mate in the ocean, but move onto land to lay their eggs. In both circumstances, the new born young are not dependent on the mother at all after birth.

The two endemic Australian species, Short-nosed and Leaf-scaled sea snakes are both considered endangered by the IUCN and under Australia's Environmental Protection and Biodiversity and Conservation Act. The cause of their rapid population decline is not entirely known, since they are not affected by overfishing and their habitat is relatively intact. This leaves changes in surface water temperature, rainfall and salinity. They may also be affected by seismic air gunning for oil and gas. More research needs to be done on the impacts of these factors on the sea snakes before we can properly protect them.

Did you know? The venom of Sea snakes is more poisonous than that of land snakes, but they are quite shy and have very short fangs (approximately 3mm) so no one in Australia has ever died from it's bite.