NAKED NUDIS

Nudibranchs are wild and wonderful sea slugs, which can be found in every ocean of the world and are abundant in Darwin Harbour. Their Latin name literally means ‘naked gill’, which (in some of them at least) can be seen as the tree-like structures extending from their back. Nudibranchs ‘swing both ways’ and are hermaphrodites, born with both male and female sexual organs, which are generally on the right side of the body in the neck region! Over 200 million years of evolution, Nudibranchs have developed amazing survival systems, including chemical and biological weaponry, vibrant colouration, camouflage and the ability to swim away from predators.

Picture: Samantha Nowland
(Photograph taken on the Bellbird Wreck, Darwin Harbour)

COLOURFUL CRAYS

The Painted Cray (Panulirus versicolor) or painted rock lobster is native to Australia and occurs all over the Top End. They can grow up to 40cm long, with males usually growing larger than females. Unlike most lobsters, these beautiful crayfish have no claws, however they are dangerously armed with two frontal horns and numerous spines! Their colourful camouflage helps them hide from predators and blend into the tropical reefs in which they live. Painted Crays are nocturnal and solitary. During the day they hide in small caves and crevices in reefs at depths up to 15m. At night they leave their hiding holes and hunt for live fish and invertebrates or discarded carrion.

Picture: Xanthe Rivett
(Photograph taken Nhulunbuy NT)

SHY SNUBBIES

Australia’s Snubfin Dolphin (Orcaella heinsohni), affectionately known as ‘stubbies’ are one of Australia’s only two native dolphins, and are unique to northern Australia. Unlike most dolphins, they have a very blunt, round head and a stubby dorsal fin. These shy and elusive marine mammals were only described as a separate species in 2005. ‘Stubbies’ live in small groups near the coast in the murky waters of tidal creeks and mangrove systems. When feeding, snubfin dolphins spit jets of water into the air, presumably to disorientate their prey. It is estimated that less than 1000 of these adorable dolphins are left in the oceans today! Snubbies are one of the rarest dolphins in Australia and the world and we must protect them.

Picture: Peter Kyne

TOP END SAWFISH

Sawfish (family Pristidae) are actually modified rays with a shark-like body and pinnate fins on their underside. Sawfish get their name from their saw-like rostrum, which is covered with electro-sensitive pores to detect their prey hiding in the sand or sediment of the sea bed. Their rostrum also serves as a digging tool, a weapon to stun and kill prey, and a defence against predators such as sharks. The teeth protruding from the rostrum are not real teeth, but modified tooth-like structures called denticles. The NT is home to four species of sawfish, most of which are vulnerable to extinction. Our waters provide a safe haven for the survival of this group of unusual and wonderful fish.

Picture: Peter Kyne

MERMAIDS IN OUR MIDST

Have you seen a dugong in Darwin Harbour? Dugongs (Dugong dugon) are shy, elusive marine mammals that spend their entire lives at sea. Their scientific family name Sirenia refers to the sirens of ancient Greek Mythology as they were often mistaken for mermaids by early European explorers. Dugongs have similar life spans to us, living to around 70 years of age. Dugongs don’t bear young until at least seven years old, and only then every 3-6 years. This makes dugongs vulnerable to impacts on their population. Dugongs depend almost entirely on sea grass for food and eat up to 55kg a day! Although Darwin is the only known location where they also graze on algae and other plants that grow on shallow rocky reefs, in the Top End we can see dugongs when out on Darwin Harbour, mostly around Channel Island and Elizabeth River estuary. Have you seen one lately?

Picture: GBRMPA

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