

Tiny Dragons of the Sea

When people think of dragons, they usually think of huge, mythical, scary creatures of fairy tales that breathe fire and are feared, or they may think of the friendly, gentle dragon companions of recent books and movies. But there exists other dragons, graceful, miniature creatures that live out their lives seeking food and refuge in swaying seaweed off the southern coast of Australia. They are called Leafy Sea Dragons; beautiful, lacy, mesmerizing, tiny forms that move slowly with the ocean camouflaged by extensions from their bodies, which mimic seaweed. More spectacular in looks than their cousins the seahorses, "Leafies" are larger and can reach eighteen inches. Unlike the more common seahorses, Leafies are rare and also are not able to use their tails to curl around seaweed to stop their movement.

Leafies move very slowly using two sets of fins, a line of very fine, thin fins located down the middle of their backs and a set of two, tiny fins on both sides of their heads above their snouts. Their heads are adorned with short, stubby extensions above the eyes that are particularly big in their young. People having seen them alive are captivated by their ability to move gracefully given such limited resources.

They eat from their snouts that look like tubes. They are able to use their snouts like straws and suck in food particles they find among the seaweed. Their camouflage saves them from predators as does their sharp, external spines. They have no known ocean predators, but are sought after by collectors. Thankfully, they are now protected under Australian law and can only be taken by special permits.

Leafy Sea Dragons are actually fish, not dragons or miniature horses. They are considered fish because they have backbones, gills, and fins. Their close relatives in Australia are the more common Weedy Sea Dragons (called "Weedies") who grow to longer lengths, display far less extensions, and are found more often in a wider range along the Australian coastline.

"Dragon Search" is a conservation group located in Australia that is conducting studies to better understand Sea Dragons, habits and needs, in order to protect them. Divers in Australia are asked to photograph the rare Leafy Sea Dragons. The staff at Dragon Search is able to identify individual Leafy Sea Dragons by their unique facial characteristics much like Humpback whales can be identified in photographs by the unique markings on their flukes.

Leafy Sea Dragons may be seen in Perth, Western Australia in their aquarium, and will be displayed again at the Monterey Bay Aquarium in Monterey, California.

Name _____

Date _____

Tiny Dragons of the Sea Questions

Vocabulary Development

1. Underline the following vocabulary words in the story and match them with their definitions:

camouflage

refuge

predator

transparent

mythical

mesmerizing

mimic

flukes

snout

resource

- a. disguise
- b. preys on other animals
- c. in a fable or story
- d. hypnotic
- e. protruding nose
- f. shelter
- g. see through
- h. whale's tail
- i. support or aid
- j. fascinating

Name _____

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Tiny Dragons of the Sea Questions

How do Leafy Sea Dragons resemble fairy tale dragons? How are they different?

Compare and contrast Leafy Sea Dragons and Weedy Sea Dragons.

How do Dragon Search staff identify individual sea dragons?

Why are sea dragons considered fish?

Why do you think sea dragons need protection?

Tiny Dragons of the Sea Answers

1. Leafy sea dragons resemble fairy tale dragons because they both have long snouts, long tails, and short forearms. Leafy sea dragons are small, live in the ocean, do not breathe fire, and are real. Fairy tale dragons are feared, breathe fire, are very large, and not real.
2. Weedy Sea Dragons are more common, found in a wider range of coastline in Australia, are longer than Leafy Sea Dragons, and have less extensions.

Or

Leafy Sea Dragons are rarer than Weedy Sea Dragons, are found in a more narrow range of coastline in Australia, are smaller than Weedy Sea Dragons and have many more extensions.

- 3 . Dragon Search identify individual Leafy Sea Dragons by their unique faces. Divers often take pictures and send them to Dragon Search.
- 4 . Sea Dragons are considered fish because they have backbones, gills, and fins.
5. Sea Dragons need protection because they are sought after by people who sell them to collectors.