

Harlequin Tuskfish

Is the Harlequin tuskfish safe for a reef aquarium?

By Jeremy Gosnell

Q. I have a 125-gallon aquarium and have always wanted to keep a Harlequin tuskfish. I have heard that the Harlequin tuskfish is from the wrasse family, is that true? Also, is the Harlequin tuskfish safe for a reef aquarium, or will it eat corals and fish?

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Harlequin tuskfish by Tony Terceira.A. Whoever told you that the Harlequin tuskfish (*Lienardella fasciata*) is a wrasse was right. While the Harlequin tuskfish may not look like some of the smaller wrasses, (i.e. flasher wrasses or sixline wrasses) it most certainly is a wrasse. The wrasse family is truly dynamic. It is home to fish as small as a sixline wrasse, (*Pseudocheilinus hexataenia*) and as large as a Napoleon wrasse (*Cheilinus undulatus*) which can grow up to 10 feet in length. When you think about the variation of species within the wrasse family it is rather overwhelming.

The Harlequin tuskfish isn't nearly as "reef safe" as many of the other wrasse species. First, Harlequin tuskfish get rather large – maxing out at around 10 inches. Even in a reef aquarium as large as yours they will leave a footprint where dissolved nutrients are concerned. Second, they didn't get the nickname "tusk-fish" for nothing. The unique, blue tusk-like teeth they sport certainly aren't for eating algae. Those are certified invertebrate crunchers. That said, I wouldn't be worried about a Harlequin tuskfish doing a whole lot to damage corals. (An interesting fact about these fish is that not only are their "tusks" blue but their bones are as well.)

Invertebrates would be on the menu, and would more than likely be your shrimp, crabs and even snails. Small fish, even wrasses, would also be on the menu. So overall I think a Harlequin tuskfish could be a major risk if you currently keep a fully stocked reef aquarium.

You do have to remember that all fish are individuals. I know many aquarists who have Harlequin tuskfish in their reef aquariums and have not had any problems. I once kept a Harlequin tuskfish in my reef aquarium for several years. In my experience cleaner shrimp and other invertebrates that had been established in the reef aquarium before the Harlequin tuskfish came along were safe – though any new additions were quickly gobbled up. While I would like to be able to guarantee some safety for your preexisting invertebrates; in reality your experience could be much different from mine.

Another problem Harlequin tuskfish pose in reef aquariums is their diet. Harlequin tuskfish require a varied diet with live feeder shrimp being a popular fish food item. I have found in reef environments that live fish foods can be difficult to feed and have an overall negative impact on water quality. Live fish which are fed as fish food can introduce disease into the reef aquarium.

I know the beauty and unique behaviors of the Harlequin tuskfish make them highly desirable in the reef aquarium. Sadly, their unique diet and size compiled with their appetite and eating habits make them overall unsuited for the reef aquarium. That said, if you are an adventurous reefkeeper like myself then you may still be lured into keeping a Harlequin tuskfish in your reef aquarium and perhaps it will yield fair results.