

Saltwater Aquarium Cleaning Crew

Do I really need invertebrate clean-up crews for a moderately stocked marine aquarium?

By Jeremy Gosnell

Q. I have a 55 gallon fish-only tank with live rock that has been running for about five months. Everyone tells me that I need invertebrate clean-up crews to clean out the tank. It just seems expensive to me to purchase snails and crabs when I do plenty of water changes. Also, won't some of my fish eat the clean-up crews?

In the tank right now I keep the following fish:

- 2 False Percula clownfish
- 1 Coral beauty angelfish
- 5 Green reef Chromis
- 1 Magnificent wrasse
- 1 Yellow head (pearly) jawfish

From what I have read, this is a relatively small fish population -- do I really need anything to clean up after them? In addition to that, won't the inverts just crowd up the tank more and add to the waste?

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A. I do agree that for a 55-gallon aquarium you are keeping a moderate fish population. None of the fish that you currently have get very large, with the coral beauty (*Centropyge bispinosus*) being the largest, though they max out at around 4 inches. You say that you have a magnificent wrasse; I am uncertain what type of fish this is. Since there are so many fish in the wrasse family some reef safe and others not, this fish may pose a threat to potential invert clean-up crews.

First, none of the fish that you are currently keeping (with the exception of the mystery wrasse) would pose much of a threat to any invertebrate. I have seen jawfish of various species attack small cleaner shrimp or hermit crabs but even that is fairly rare and seldom a problem. If your tank is already five months old then your sand bed and rock should have enough detritus accumulated to support an invert population. One nice thing about clean-up crews is that not only do they help clean up un-eaten food or un-wanted algae; they are also very entertaining, as well. I have come to appreciate and enjoy my snails, hermit crabs, cowries and shrimp nearly as much as my fish and corals.

You can even acquire various shrimp, such as the skunk cleaner shrimp (*Lysmata amboinensis*) that will pick parasites and dead skin off of your fish and even consume some algae, as well. How's that for good work? Another nice thing about these clean-up crews is that they don't add to the biological waste accumulation much, if at all. Because invertebrates have very slow metabolisms when compared to fish, they do not expel nearly the amount of waste.

Honestly, I think having invertebrate clean-up crews is beneficial on nearly every level. Of course, if you make the choice to have an invert team cleaning up your tank it won't be a fish-only tank anymore, although I suspect since you employ live rock you have a healthy group of inverts in there already. Porcelain crabs and bristle worms are all notorious hitchhikers in marine aquariums.

As for cost, I can understand why you find these creatures rather expensive. Depending on the outlet a person can invest a fair bit of cash in a good clean-up crew. There are two ways to purchase these animals; either slowly acquire some here and there, or buy a pre-packaged crew. Typically, the latter option is only available if you order from an online retailer. Either way works just fine, but I like to do a bit of both. Normally when any of my new aquariums reach four to six months of age I will order a package of cleaning invertebrates online and if I see something interesting in a fish store, I buy that, as well. Take caution in any approach though; not all inverts offered for tank clean-up are reef safe and some will consume corals with the same gusto as waste or algae.

Animals to look for in a good clean up package include: turbo grazer snails, Nassarius snails, cerith snails, and scarlet reef hermit crabs for algae. Also, tiger tail sea cucumbers, fighting conch, brittle or serpent sea stars, and even linkia sea stars all make good detritus cleaners. As for fish cleaning, nothing beats the interesting and educational display that a skunk cleaner shrimp can put on when working away on a tankmate.