

Leafy Sea Dragons

Can leafy sea dragons be kept in aquariums?

By Scott W. Michael

Q. I have just heard about a marine fish called a leafy sea dragon. I understand they are related to sea horses. I'd like to learn more about this fish, but my references, plus the public library and my local bookstore, don't carry any information on this species.

I have three questions for you. First, what size tank do I need to keep this fish? Is it difficult to keep? What does it eat?

Thank you for your help. I love your magazine.

A. These are some of the most magnificent animals on the planet! The first time I saw a live one I thought I was looking at a mythical beast. The leafy sea dragon (*Phycodurus eques*) belongs to the family Syngnathidae, which includes the sea horses and the pipefishes. They live in large kelp beds off the southern coast of Australia. They often hang out over small sand patches among the macroalgae, where they catch small shrimp, especially swarming mysid shrimp. They reach a maximum length of about 14 inches.

In order to protect these easily captured fish from overexploitation, the Australian government has made it illegal to collect them. However, an occasional collector will get a permit to capture leafy sea dragons for "scientific purposes." Some of these are sold to public aquariums, and, on rare occasions, are available to hobbyists.

They command a very high price (over \$10,000) and are not easy to keep. They need to be kept at cooler water temperatures (60 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit) and often will not eat anything except live mysid shrimp. I would strongly advise marine hobbyists to leave these fish in the wild, and go marvel at them at a public aquarium that displays them (e.g., Underwater World, Perth Australia, Underwater World, Singapore, Dallas World Aquarium).