

Creature Feature – Maori Humphead Wrasse



A Gentle Giant

On the steep outer slopes of coral reefs roams a gentle giant. At over 2 meters long, with a large hump on the head, and big fleshy lips that rival those of Angelina Jolie, the Maori humphead wrasse is easily recognized. Divers are thrilled to encounter this fish as they are known for being extremely interactive; from following a diver with watchful eyes to rubbing against a diver's outstretched hand or even giving a gentle nudge just as a dog would when it wants to be petted. This wrasse's willingness to interact with people is partly a reflection of the individual personality of each fish, and in part a result of previous experiences with humans. Sadly, these fish have been prized for their flesh rather than their personalities, which has earned them a place on the IUCN endangered list.

This is the largest species of the wrasse family and it is found throughout the Indo-Pacific region, including around reefs in the Coral Sea. Its scientific name, *Cheilinus undulatus*, is derived from the Latin word *undulatus* meaning 'waved', referring to the wavy lines on the body and the two lines behind both eyes. Here are some other interesting facts about the humphead wrasse:

Fast Facts:

Taxonomy: Belongs to the family Labridae (wrasse) among the Perciform fishes. Common names include giant humphead wrasse, Maori humphead wrasse, Napoleon humphead wrasse, blue-tooth groper, and giant Maori wrasse.

Average size: Approximately 229cm. The maximum weight published is 191 kg.

Lifespan: The maximum reported age is 32 years.

Food: Primarily feed on mollusks, fishes, sea urchins, crustaceans, and other invertebrates. They are one of the few predators of toxic animals such as sea hares, boxfishes, and crown-of-thorns starfish.

Habitat: Inhabits steep outer reef slopes, channel slopes, and lagoon reefs throughout the Indo-Pacific. Found at depths ranging from 1 to 100m. Adults roam the reef by day and rest in reef caves and under coral ledges at night. Juveniles are found in coral-rich areas of lagoon reefs, particularly in regions rich in staghorn *Acropora* corals, as well as algae reefs or seagrasses.

Predators: With the exception of some large sharks, there are few predators that would take on such a large meal, so adult humphead wrasses have few predators. Humans are the greatest threat to this species. Most vulnerable to predation in larval and juvenile stages.

Growth: Reach sexual maturity at 5-7 years of age.

Life history: Pairs spawn together and planktonic eggs are released into the water. When the larvae hatch they settle onto the substrate. Females can turn into males, but the triggers for this change are poorly understood.

Interview with an expert:

Tyrone Canning has been diving for nearly 25 years, but it wasn't until 1999, when he won the Australian Ultimate Diver Competition, that his passion for capturing images of the world beneath was awakened. His prize for winning the competition not only included all new gear, but a trip to Cocos Island, Costa Rica; a place famous for its hammerhead sharks. As it turned out, an Australian underwater film crew was on the cruise also and Tyrone recognized the opportunity and stayed beyond his week-long trip to help the crew for 45 days. He did whatever it took including jumping into the water while sharks frenzied around a bait ball. Luckily, it was Tyrone that was the only one snapping under water that day and he has been working as an underwater cameraman ever since. Tyrone has spent many hours in the water with Maori humphead wrasse and has had some very personal encounters.

Q. Tyrone, what was your first encounter with Maori humphead wrasse?

I first encountered them when working with Taka Dive, diving the Great Barrier Reef all the time. However, I became really connected with a dominant male known locally as Wally when I worked with Great Adventures and we were diving from the activity platform on Norman Reef. Since then, I've seen them in Egypt, Thailand, and throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

Q. When you were diving regularly with Wally, how did you know it was him and not just another wrasse?

You just know. Individuals are fairly easily recognized. First, the general size of the fish is a good indicator and second, the cranial bulge can also be a distinguishing feature as it gets bigger as the male ages. But more than just appearances, it is their personalities that help define the individuals. Some are very

cautious around humans, while others come over and nudge you for attention. You start to become very familiar with their habits.

Q. These wrasses are long-lived creatures. Do you know if the Wally you knew is still around?

Sadly, Wally was in a battle with another male a number of years ago that ultimately led to his demise.

Q. What happened?

One day when I was diving off the platform on Norman Reef I spotted Wally hanging out under the platform. His lower jaw was pretty messed up and I knew right away he had been in a fight. The battles between males can be very violent. I knew at that point he wasn't doing too well. The next morning, we could see there were sharks everywhere in the water including a big whaler that was circling the pontoon. I got my gear and jumped in the water ready to catch some footage and spotted Wally wedged in a crevice. He had been bitten clean in half. All the sharks were hanging around, but given Wally's size, I would guess that it must have been a tiger shark to bite him in half.

As it turns out, the young and upcoming wrasse that messed up Wally's jaw became the dominant male and I've been away from there for six years now and he is still the dominant fish.

Q. You have seen these wrasses in Asia in aquaria and food markets, how did you feel seeing them there after witnessing them in the wild?

Devastated. These are intelligent creatures with personalities. If people were made to dive with their dinner before eating, if they could watch these animals in their natural habitats...well, I'm not sure they could bring themselves to eat them. I've been around the world and in areas where these fish are prized for their flesh I just simply didn't see them in the water. It's a huge loss to the reef.

Q. Any last messages you'd like to share?

These are magnificent creatures that are extremely long-lived. Wally probably witnessed many generations of divers over his lifetime. Sadly, this species is endangered. As Australians we have an opportunity to create safe havens for the Wally's of the world. We have the will and the ability to establish large marine reserves more than other countries might and so we should be leaders.