

Blue Tang

COMMON NAME: Blue tangs

SCIENTIFIC

NAME: *Paracanthurus hepatus*

TYPE: Fish

DIET: Herbivore

GROUP NAME: School

AVERAGE LIFE SPAN IN
THE WILD: 30 or more years

AVERAGE LIFE SPAN IN CAPTIVITY: Up to 20 years

SIZE: 26-30cms

WEIGHT: 2.2kg



What is a blue tang?

Blue tangs are small fish that live in coral reefs in the Indo-Pacific Ocean. The animals are easy to spot, thanks to their characteristically vibrant colours of royal blue and canary yellow.

The blue tang's colour patterns are not as reliable as you might think. Young blue tangs are bright yellow, for example. As adults, the fish will turn deeper blues and violets as a sign of stress.

Blue tangs may look relatively harmless, but when in danger they can raise a pair of razor-sharp, venomous spines on either side of their tails. The fish then whip their bodies from side to side, threatening to stab predators with their toxin-tipped stingers.

Additionally, people who eat blue tangs have been known to develop a serious foodborne illness called ciguatera poisoning. Symptoms include vomiting, diarrhea, and dizziness. Ciguatera poisoning happens because tangs sometimes eat large quantities of creatures called dinoflagellates, which create several kinds of poisons that build up in the tang's body.

Mistaken identities

The blue tang goes by many common names, including palette surgeonfish, regal blue tang, hippo tang, flagtail surgeonfish, royal blue tang, Pacific regal blue tang, and blue surgeonfish.



Habitat and diet

Blue tangs can be found in the clear waters on and surrounding coral reefs. They inhabit a wide range across the Pacific and Indian Oceans that stretches from American Samoa to the eastern coast of Africa.



While blue tangs are omnivores and have been known to eat tiny aquatic creatures known as plankton, most of their diet comes from algae. The fish use small, sharp teeth to nip and scrape algae off the coral reef.

This makes the fish an important part of the coral reef. Without blue tangs and other fish that perform this algae-cleaning service, the plants would suffocate and kill coral, giving the whole food chain a problem.

Threats to survival

While the blue tang isn't listed as an endangered species, its numbers have been getting smaller because they are now a popular fish to have in a tropical fish tank. Experts say this could mean as many as a quarter of a million blue tangs have been removed from their homes on reefs each year.

Worse still, blue tangs and other wild reef fish are commonly caught with squirt bottles full of cyanide, which stun the fish long enough for people to catch them. Young fish are usually targeted because they flock to stony corals where they can be caught en masse. But that method can also kill the fish on contact, as well as injure or kill other animals nearby.

The coral reefs that the blue tang call home are also under threat from things like ocean acidification and coral bleaching. This means habitat loss may also be a danger to the fish.

