

Cavalos-marinhos: Seahorses in Ria Formosa

Why care about seahorses?

We love seahorses because they are weird, wacky, charming fish. Their unique shape and unusual behavior such as couples holding tails or males giving birth, appeal to people's hearts. We truly believe if we save seahorses, we can save the seas. We share with you some of our favorite facts in hopes that you too will be charmed to take action for these unusual fish.

Seahorse biology: weird & wonderful

- 44 different known species (to date)
- Unusual shape: - snout like a horse, tail like a monkey & males have pouches like kangaroos
- Males become pregnant
- Seahorse couples 'greet' each other every day & hold tails
- All of these unusual traits help us to expand our understanding of reproductive ecology

Seahorse ecology: strong relationships with habitat

- Live in many important coastal habitats like seagrasses, mangroves, reefs, estuaries and lagoons
- Once they find a place to call home, they become long-term residents
- Important predators on bottom-dwelling organisms
- Removing them may disrupt coastal ecosystems
- Their strong links with habitat make them representative symbols of these places and the many marine conservation issues they face. Therefore, protections for seahorses benefit many other marine species and ecosystems.

Seahorse have economic value

- Global trade for aquaria, traditional medicine, and curios
- Trade involves over 80 countries and 26 species
- Important source of income and food security for subsistence fishers



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What threats do seahorses face?

From our research we know that seahorse biology and behaviour — for example, the young depend on parental survival far longer than most fish, and many species are seasonally monogamous — makes them particularly susceptible to overfishing, habitat loss, and other human pressures. We estimate tens of millions are internationally traded each year. For some species, these pressures have placed their populations under threat.

Here is what we know about seahorses in Portugal:

- Two species are known to occur in Portugal: the **Long-snouted seahorse** and the **Short-snouted seahorse**.
- The **global conservation status** of the Long-snouted seahorse and the Short-snouted seahorse is **Data Deficient**. This means that we do not have enough information globally about where they live and the threats they face to identify conservation concerns.
- In the Mediterranean, the **regional conservation status** of these seahorses is **Near-threatened**. This means that their populations are declining as a result of habitat degradation (caused by coastal development and destructive fishing gears such as trawls and dredges).
- Seahorse species are known to inhabit seagrass beds, as well as other habitats, such as coral reefs and mangroves.
- In Portugal, seahorses are mostly found in the Ria Formosa Natural Park – a large wetland of international importance.
- The highest population density of seahorses in the world was recorded in the Ria Formosa in 2001. But in 2008 there was a marked decrease in these species abundance (94% for long-snouted seahorse and 73% for the short-snouted seahorse), and then a slight recovery in 2012.
- Recently seahorses have been illegally caught in the Ria Formosa and traded illegally.
- Globally, seahorse species are traded for use as aquarium fishes, curios and traditional Chinese medicine.

Seahorse species found in Portugal and their global conservation status

Species	Common Name	Global Conservation Status
<i>Hippocampus guttulatus</i>	Long-snouted seahorse	Data-Deficient
<i>Hippocampus hippocampus</i>	Short-snouted seahorse	Data-Deficient