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Size matters for animals that change sex

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LONDON (Reuters) -- Whether a tiny crustacean or a 1.5 meter long fish, creatures that spontaneously change their sex do it when they reach 72 percent of their maximum size, scientists said on Wednesday.

David Allsop and Stuart West, of the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, studied dozens of species of sex-changing creatures such as fish, worms, shrimp and mollusks and all of them followed the same rule when altering their gender.

"Ninety-eight percent of the variation in the size at sex change across 121 species can be explained by this rule of 72 percent of maximum body size," Allsop, an evolutionary biologist said in an interview.

Spontaneous sex change is relatively common in lower aquatic species with simple reproductive systems. Half of the creatures will change from male to female and the rest will switch the other way. Regardless of which way they change, the gender-altering creatures can still successfully reproduce afterwards.

"They are mother and father in the same lifetime. That is the staggering thing about it," he added.

Allsop, who reported the findings in the science journal Nature, said the creatures reach 72 percent of their maximum size and then something triggers the sex change, but they are not sure what it is.

"Our results suggest that the underlying factors favoring sex change are remarkably similar in all animals. More generally, it is amazing that simple theoretical ideas can potentially explain a universal characteristic of growth and reproduction across such different groups" West added in a statement.



The large black grouper and tiny shrimp *Thor manningi*, inset, switch sex at the same relative scale, about 72 percent of their adult size.

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