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Species Switch Sex at Specific Size

AFP

Oct. 27, 2003 — Species that automatically change sex do so when they reach nearly three-quarters of their maximum size, neatly proving a cornerstone of evolutionary theory, scientists said.

Dozens of animal species, from types of fish and crustaceans to mollusks and worms, spontaneously change sex as a result of the pressures for survival and reproduction.

In the case of the clownfish, a favorite of aquarium-lovers, the gender bending is taken to extremes — males can not only switch to female, but also increase in size to become the alpha-breeder in their piscatorial group.



Male Today, Female Tomorrow

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Biologists David Allsop and Stuart West of Edinburgh University in Scotland studied 77 sex-changing species, ranging from a tiny shrimp, the *Thor manningi*, to a 1.5-meter (5-foot) fish called a black grouper.

They found that the creatures swapped

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gender when they reached 72 percent of maximum size, regardless of mating system, sex-change mechanism and other factors.

"This suggests that there is a fundamental similarity across all animals ... in the underlying forces that select for sex change," they wrote in Thursday's issue of *Nature*, the British weekly science journal.

Under evolutionary theory, an individual is at most pressure to change gender when there is a serious imbalance between the sexes and it has reached an age and size where it can do the switch successfully and contribute quickly to the gene pool.

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Name: Clown Anemonefish (*species*)

Primary Classification: Acanthopterygii (Spiny-Rayed Fishes)

Location: Northern Queensland to Melanesia.

Habitat: Sea anemones.

Diet: Mainly zooplankton. Possibly algae.

Size: Up to 3.1 inches in length.

Description: Bright orange body with three white, vertical bars bordered in black; middle bar has rounded bulge; 10 dorsal-fin spines;

Cool Facts: It forms a symbiotic relationship with a host anemone; through contact with the anemone's tentacles, it acquires a mucous coat, which protects it from being stung.

Conservation Status: No special status.

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