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Sex-changing animals obey the laws of nature

by Joanna on 24 October 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 say.



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

In the case of the clownfish, a favourite 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.

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-metre fish called a black grouper.

They found that the creatures swapped gender when they reached 72 per cent 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 write in the latest issue of Nature, the 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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Comments:

Comment by: **Becky** on 26/10/2003 06:50:00

Argh! I'm losing weight at the moment, does that mean I'll change back into a boy when I reach 72% of my old weight? Scary thought! :)

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