

## DRAGONS OF THE SEAS

The collection of a 'pregnant' male seadragon by divers from Underwater World last September provided a rare chance to study seadragons in captivity.

Seadragons are found only in southern Australian waters and hang almost motionless in the water, tiny fins fluttering to give stability and balance. Splashes of yellow, red and purple cover their bodies.

They are slow swimmers, but their fragile leafy appendages provide perfect camouflage among seagrass beds. Although quite common along our coast, they are rarely seen, even by experienced divers. Only the rolling of their swivelling eyes betrays them to predators.

Seadragons mate from September to December. The female produces 100 to 250 eggs, which she wipes against a wrinkled area of skin underneath the male's tail. The eggs adhere to this patch, which forms cup-like moulds around the eggs. The oxygen-rich blood vessels in the tissue keep the egg oxygenated during the eight-week incubation period.

The male seadragon caught by Underwater World had about 80 eggs, which were pink and covered in a green/brown algae. When they hatched, the young seadragons emerged tail first and swam freely after a few minutes. The yolk sac still attached to their bodies provided the young with two days' sustenance.

After 50 days the young seadragons had grown 90 millimetres long. They will not reach their full adult size of 40 to 45 centimetres for at least two years. After a year the animals will be 20 centimetres long and sexually mature.

Another male has since hatched 20 eggs, which will also be monitored.

Seadragons have no teeth, so keeping them in captivity is difficult. However, Underwater World aims to care for the dragons through a complete life cycle and eventually release them into the ocean.

Little is known about them but it is hoped that constant care, observation and research will increase our understanding of these amazing fish.



*A two-week-old common seadragon (Phyllopteryx taeniolatus) that recently hatched at Underwater World.*

*The leafy seadragon (Phycodurus eques), which looks incredibly like a piece of seagrass, is a close relative of the common seadragon.*  
Photos - Van Worley ▼



# LANDSCOPE

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Rock-wallabies threw down the gauntlet to scientists trying to trap them for research. Who ended up winning the catch-me-if-you-can contest? See page 35.



Scientists will use modern technology to restore two rare and endangered mammals to an area in the Gibson Desert from which they have become extinct. See page 10.



Shells, tiny crabs and sundry other creatures are sure to please the curious naturalist who invades the intertidal zone at low tide. Explore the place where the shore meets the sea on page 23.



Waterbirds flock to the Vasse-Wonnerup wetlands in their tens of thousands, some travelling over 10 000 kilometres from summer breedings grounds in northern China and Siberia. Turn to page 17.



It's the burning question! Is prescribed burning in spring or autumn better for the jarrah forest? Or is there another alternative? See page 28.

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## COVER

The designs of desert artist Benny Tjapaltjarri show events associated with the Pakuru or golden bandicoot dreaming in the Gibson Desert. The three central roundels depict rockholes and the others represent hills. The background dots show the vegetation of the area.



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