

Rockfish

Sebastes spp



On view at the Aquarium in Kelp Forest, Monterey Bay Habitats, Giant Pacific Octopus

Meet the rockfish

Rockfish come in more than 100 species and many different shapes, sizes and color patterns. Colors vary from black and drab green to bright orange and red, and some rockfishes wear stripes or splotches. Their heads feature large eyes and thick, broad mouths that dip downward at the corners. Rockfishes are known for the bony plates on their heads and bodies, and the heavy spines on their fins.



Animal type

Fishes



Habitat

Kelp forest



Size

Five to 41 inches (12-104 cm) depending on the species



Diet

Plankton, small crustaceans, fish



Range

From intertidal waters to more than 1,500 feet (457 m) deep. North Pacific, from Japan to the Gulf of California; a few species live in the South Pacific and Atlantic Oceans



Relatives

Thornyheads, stonefishes, California scorpionfish; Family: Scorpaenidae (scorpionfish)

Did you know?

Rockfish live in a variety of habitats. Some live on rocky reefs or seafloors in nearshore shallow waters. Others live on the deep seafloor or in the water column. In giant kelp forests, rockfish hover motionless under the kelp canopy, buoyed by their air bladders. Some species rest on rocks at the bottom of the kelp forest, with creatures like sea cucumbers and abalone.

Rockfish are one of the longest-living fishes, possibly living to 200 years old in the Gulf of Alaska. That means a rockfish on today's dinner menu could have been swimming the sea when Abraham Lincoln was delivering his Gettysburg Address.

Conservation

Rockfish, also known as rock cod or Pacific red snapper, are popular with seafood lovers. But some rockfishes don't breed until they're 20 years old, and they have few young. These factors make them very vulnerable to overfishing.

Commercial and recreational rockfish fishing from the 1960s to the 1990s sent several rockfish populations plummeting. In fact, some populations have declined by 98 percent since 1970 due to overfishing and habitat loss, and few adult fishes are left in some areas off Southern California. To aid in the recovery of rockfish populations, emergency fishing closures were put in place along the West Coast in 2002. Field studies have shown that

where chains of small reserves were established, sea life flourished. All rockfishes from the U.S. are considered a “Best Choice” or “Good Alternative” by our Seafood Watch program. [Read rockfish recommendations on SeafoodWatch.org](https://www.seafoodwatch.org) to learn more.

Cool facts

- Fishes in the Scorpaenidae family, like rockfish, have venomous fin spines. The venom ranges from very toxic for stonefish to slightly toxic for rockfish. But since rockfish venom can cause pain and infection, anyone handling rockfish must handle them with care.
- Egg production differs with each species, and canary rockfish can produce as many as 1,000,000 eggs at one time. Fertilization is internal for all rockfishes, and the females supply nutrients internally to the developing larvae. Four to five weeks after fertilization, females give birth to larvae about the size of an eyelash.
- Tagging and tracking studies have shown that many rockfish are homebodies. They travel short distances, if at all, and return to their home base if placed in another locale. Tagging and tracking rockfish is difficult. Even though rockfish regulate the amount of air in their air bladders, the air bladders explode when the fish are brought to the surface quickly. Researchers tag fishes after deflating their air bladders under water at appropriate depths.

