



Sea Squirts

What are they?

Sea squirts are a kind of animal called a tunicate. Tunicates are animals that are named because it looks like they are wearing tunics, or short, sleeveless garments. Tunicates have a tough outer covering.

What do they look like?

These animals are also called sea grapes, because they actually look like grapes. They are even greenish-yellow, just like some grapes. Sea squirts live in large clusters, so you might think they are just one animal. However, each tiny part of the cluster is an individual animal.

Each sea squirt has two siphons. It uses one siphon to draw in sea water, full of plankton. Then, the water is spurted out the other siphon.



Photo Source: L&L Langstroth, Cal Images

Like many animals, sea squirts circulate blood throughout their bodies. However they do it in a unique way. They pump blood one way through their bodies for several seconds. Then they reverse the flow, sending the blood in the opposite direction.

And, yes, sea squirts actually do squirt water—up to two feet—when they are out of the water.

Where can you find them?

Sea squirts are found attached to the base of piers and rocks throughout the Bay. They also attach themselves to boat bottoms and oysters. They prefer to live in water that has a high salt content, so they are mainly found in the lower parts of the Bay.

How do they behave?

Some sea squirts start off as tiny creatures that resemble tadpoles. Hatching out from an established colony, they swim only for a few hours. Then, they settle down on any unoccupied hard surface. These “tadpoles” have long tails that contain a very basic backbone with a nerve cord. They also have a very basic brain and an eye. However, all of these body parts quickly disappear when the “tadpole” attaches to a surface.

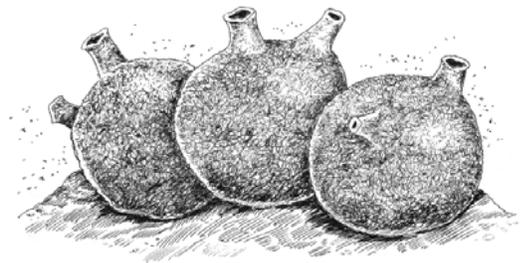
As adults, sea squirts can filter as much as three liters (a little more than three quarts) of water an hour.

What do they eat?

As a marine biologist said, “Sea squirts really love sewage.” They dine on phytoplankton and zooplankton they filter out of the water, along with bacteria and fungi such as molds.

What eats them?

Once sea squirts are past their “tadpole stage,” they have very few predators. There have been a few reports of fish and slugs feeding on them, however.



Creature Feature

Although they look like fruit, sea squirts have more in common with humans, fish, and birds. That is because—when they are in their “tadpole” stage—they have a very basic backbone. This makes them part of a family of animals called chordates, or animals that have spinal cords.