

Reef Creature and Reef Role Matching

The “creature” cards name and describe different animals living on the coral reef. The “role” cards describe the roles and symbiotic relationships of different animals living on the reef. Each creature card matches only one role card.

Creature: Purple Sea Fan

I don't always look purple, but I am always shaped like a fan. Even though I don't look like it, I am an animal just like other corals.

Role: I like to grow in the path of water currents because they bring me my favorite food—tiny plants and animals called plankton. Many reef creatures (snails, sea stars) attach to me and make me their home so they can share this food. I can also get nutrients from algae that grow on me.

Creature: Staghorn Coral

I got my name because my branches look like a deer's antlers. Even though I don't look like it, I am an animal just like other corals.

Role: I am a very important in helping to build reefs in the Caribbean. I have many branches that provide small fish, shrimp, and other reef creatures with a place to hide and sleep.

Creature: Elkhorn Coral

When I'm healthy and have lived a long time, I can be one of the biggest corals on the reef. My branches are big and thick and look like antlers. Even though I don't look like it, I am an animal just like other corals.

Role: I used to be the biggest and most common coral found in shallow Caribbean reefs. Now there aren't as many of me because water temperatures are higher, and I can't survive. That means that a lot of reef creatures (fish, shrimp, snails, worms) can't use me for shelter or food.

Reef Creature and Reef Role Matching, continued

Creature: Blue Ringed Anemone

I look like an upside down jellyfish, but instead of floating around like they do, I spend most of my life attached to rocks or the reef. Even though I sometimes look like a flower, I am an animal.

Role: Like my relative the jellyfish, my tentacles have stinging cells that I use to catch very small animals like zooplankton for food. I get some of my color from algae that live in my tentacles. Some crabs and shrimp hang out in my tentacles for protection. At the same time, they help me by removing harmful things from my tentacles.

Creature: Queen Conch

I am a really big snail and am an important part of the reef. Humans think my shell is pretty and they like the taste of my meat, so my population has gone down a lot.

Role: I help clean up the reef and sand by eating algae and dead material. Humans like to eat me and throw my shells back into the water. Even though this isn't good for me, my shell can give other creatures (crabs, shrimp, snails, small fish) a safe place to live.

Creature: Red Banded Cleaner Shrimp

I got my name because I have red bands (stripes) along my body. My red bands and my job as a cleaner make me easy to see on the reef.

Role: I am a very important and very busy creature on the reef. I set up stations where fish like grouper and parrotfish come to get cleaned. I clean them by removing bacteria, food waste, and other things from their skin and even their mouths.

Creature: Rock Lobster

I am different from my relatives in other parts of the Atlantic Ocean. Instead of big pinching claws, I have spines and hide near rocks to protect myself.

Role: I help clean up the reef and sand by feeding on dead animals. I have to be careful because humans and other creatures, like nurse sharks, enjoy eating me. That's why I often hide near rocks or in the reef during the day.

Reef Creature and Reef Role Matching, continued

Creature: Sergeant Major Fish

I got my name because my black stripes look like the stripes on a soldier's uniform. There is also a little bit of yellow on me too. I'm not the biggest fish on the reef, but when I am protecting my eggs and home, I can scare away some bigger fish.

Role: I eat all kinds of stuff, so I am found in all different parts of the reef. I also feed in large groups and with schools of yellowtail snapper fish because we both like to eat eggs floating in the water. I work hard to protect my eggs because many bigger fish, like the bluestriped grunt, like to eat them. I set up cleaning stations with blue tang fish. We work together to remove bacteria and food waste from the skin of bigger fish and turtles.

Creature: Stoplight Parrotfish

Like many reef fish, I change colors as I grow. As an adult, I am greenish-blue with some yellow and pink on my head and tail. Humans say that I am one of the prettier fish on the reef. I usually hang out by myself or in small groups.

Role: I have strong jaws and a mouth that looks like a parrot's beak. This helps me to scrape my favorite food (algae) off of the reef. This means I end up eating a lot of coral and rock too. This helps many reef creatures because my body turns the coral into sand and my waste adds sand to the reef. I also like to hang out at cleaning stations where shrimp and small fish help keep me clean.

Creature: Blue Tang Fish

I am mostly blue in color and have an oval shape. I am a medium-sized reef fish. My relatives and I are called "surgeonfish" because we have sharp spines like a surgeon's knife near our tails. I don't really eat animals, but I love to eat algae.

Role: I am usually in large groups feeding on algae right above the coral. I am like a lawn mower that keeps harmful algae from growing over and killing the reef. I eat so much algae that my waste gives the reef extra nutrients. I also set up cleaning stations with sergeant major fish. We work together to remove bacteria and food waste from the skin of bigger fish and turtles.

Creature: Black Grouper Fish

I am one of the biggest fish on the reef. I can weigh up to 220 pounds. I live alone and hang out near the bottom of the reef. You may not see me very often because humans like to eat me. This has made my population go way down.

Role: I can grow very large so I eat a lot. As a young fish, I eat crabs, lobsters, and shrimp. As an adult, I eat other fish and help keep their populations in balance. Even though I could eat them, I let small cleaner fish and shrimp eat bacteria and food waste off of my skin and mouth. This keeps me healthy and gives them something to eat.

Reef Creature and Reef Role Matching, continued

Creature: Yellowtail Snapper Fish

I am one of the most common reef fish. You can identify me by my yellow tail and yellow stripe going from my head to my tail. When humans or boats are around I hang out in large groups near the water surface, waiting for scraps of food.

Role: I like to eat tiny floating plants and animals called plankton. Sometimes I feed with schools of sergeant major fish because we both like to eat eggs floating in the water. I also steal eggs from the yellow-headed jawfish. Humans can make it really easy for me to eat when they feed me from their boats. Even though I like it, this isn't good for me or the reef.

Creature: Queen Angelfish

I am one of the most beautiful fish on the reef because of my bright blue and yellow colors. I got my name because my long fins look like angel wings. Most of the time I am alone or paired up with another queen angelfish.

Role: I am a colorful fish that is easy to spot on the reef. Humans think I am beautiful and like to remove me from the reef and put me in their fish tanks at home. This has made my population decrease a lot. I have a small, pointed mouth that helps me eat corals, sponges, and even jellyfish. Sponges are my favorite food because a lot of other creatures don't like them so there's plenty for me to eat. That means I help keep their populations in balance.

Creature: Blue Runner Fish

I am a silvery fish with a V-shaped tail. My tail and body shape help me swim fast so I can chase down my food. I have a pretty big mouth so I can eat fish and shrimp. Sometimes I work with other fish to catch more food. I'm not always on the reef. I have to migrate to other places when it is time to breed.

Role: I am an important predator on the reef because I eat other fish (grunts, snapper) and help keep their populations in balance. I often swim next to other fish and hunt with them. This helps us both catch more food. I let small cleaner fish eat bacteria and food waste off of my skin and mouth. This keeps me healthy and gives them something to eat.

Creature: Yellow Headed Jawfish

I am pretty small compared to other reef fish. I got my name because I have yellow on my head and a big jaw and mouth. I also have big eyes. It's hard to see me because I spend a lot of time hiding in my burrow that I build in the sand.

Role: I am a very small fish, so I build burrows in the sand so I can protect myself. As a male jawfish, I keep eggs in my mouth until they hatch. My burrow helps protect us from the yellowtail snapper fish that likes to eat my eggs. It also keeps me safe as I feed on small animals (zooplankton) floating along in the water above my burrow.

Reef Creature and Reef Role Matching, continued

Creature: Nurse Shark

I am one of the biggest fish on the reef, but I don't have scales like most fish. I am a top predator and hunt a lot at night. During the day I like to rest, especially on the sand near the reef. That's why a lot of humans who visit the reef see me.

Role: I sleep a lot during the day, but I am an active hunter at night. I am a top predator on the reef because I eat many different creatures, including lobster, shrimp, and fish. This means that I help keep reef populations in balance. I also use special organs on my mouth to help me find food buried in the sand. When I hunt like this, other small fish swim along with me and eat the scraps I leave behind. Humans also like to catch me and use me for bait.

Creature: Black Tip Reef Shark

I am mostly gray, but I got my name because I live on the reef and my fins have dark tips. I am usually the biggest fish on a reef, but I don't have scales like most fish. I am a top predator and my shape helps me swim fast.

Role: I am a top predator on the reef. My large size and torpedo shape help me swim fast and catch fish. Blue runners and grouper are some of my favorite food. I also eat squid, crab, and lobster. I can travel far distances and move between different reefs. Humans are often afraid of me because of my large size and the way I look.

Creature: Brain Coral

I got my name because if you look closely, you can see folds and ridges like a maze all around me. I am also called boulder brain coral because when I grow bigger I can look like huge rocks or boulders. Even though I don't look like it, I am an animal just like other corals.

Role: I am important to other reef creatures, especially worms and tiny fish. They like to hide in my maze of folds and ridges so they don't get eaten. I am important because I can grow very large and help protect the reef from strong winds and waves.