

Sea Cucumber



Image courtesy of Paul Kou/Sherkin Island Marine Station

Sea cucumbers are marine animals.

English Name: Sea Cucumber
Scientific Name: Holothuroidea
Irish Name: Súmaire cladaigh

Despite their name, Sea Cucumbers are not vegetable. They are, in fact, marine animals that live on the seabed. Typically they have long, sausage-like bodies, but there are exceptions. Their length ranges from about 2.5 cm to 1 m, depending on which species, and there are over 1,000 species around the world.

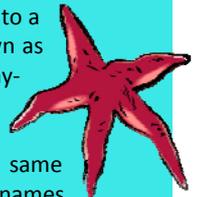
The Sea Cucumber has a leathery skin and like the starfish, has tentacles, a mouth and anus. Around its mouth are bush-like feeding tentacles, which it uses to filter water.

It uses tentacles called tube feet, adapted with sucker-pads, to move around on the seafloor.

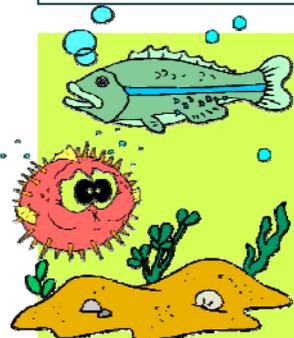
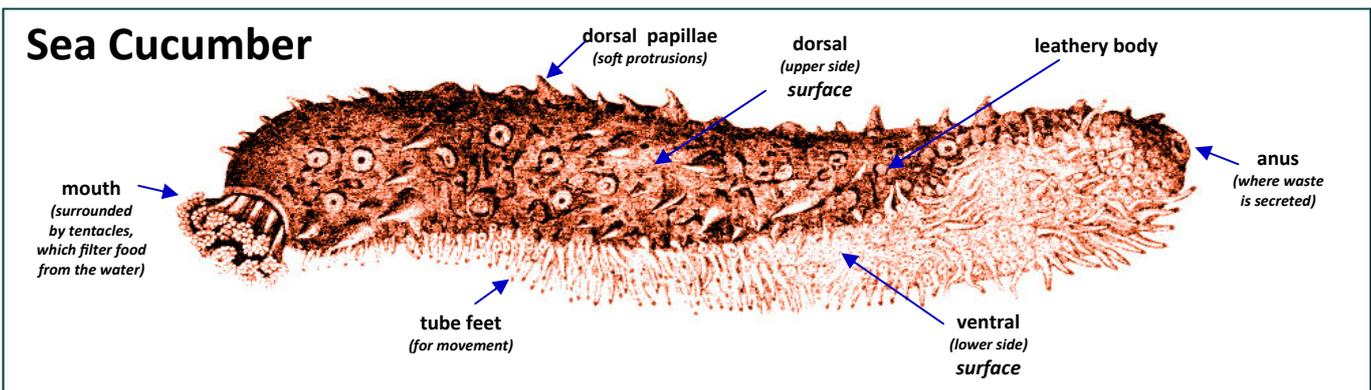
Sea cucumbers have many predators, including crabs, fish, sea turtles and humans. To defend themselves from predators, some sea cucumbers discharge sticky threads through the anus. These very long threads can entangle and disable a predator and allow the sea cucumber escape.

Family Characteristics

Sea cucumbers belong to a group of animals known as **echinoderms** — spiny-skinned animals. Starfish and sea urchins belong to the same family. As their names suggests, echinoderms all have spiny skins, although in some the spines are quite soft and not very obvious. Echinoderms have an internal skeleton of calcium carbonate plates just beneath the skin but these plates are much smaller in the sea cucumber, so it less rigid.



Echinoderms also share another feature. They have bodies which are divided into five segments. If you look at a starfish you will see the arms radiating out from a central point. From the outside, these segments are not obvious in sea cucumber, however inside its internal organs are arranged in sets of five.



Sea Cucumber Poop!

Sea Cucumbers are a little like the earthworms of the sea. Sea cucumbers are good cleaners of the sea floor, consuming decomposing matter from the surface of the seabed and surrounding waters and then secreting lots of “clean” sandy beads.

Food for Thought!

Sea Cucumbers are eaten as a delicacy in many cultures in East and Southeast Asia. They are eaten fresh but are most often dried and then rehydrated when needed for recipes. It is said they are high in nutrients but that they have very little taste. Because the sea cucumbers are in high demand and people will pay a lot of money for them, some divers will even risk their lives to collect them. Given that sea cucumbers are so good at cleaning the seabed, there is concern about their populations and it is feared they are being overharvested.

