



## AQUAFRESH

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The annual visit to the dentist is not one I choose to remember. Lying on a narrow couch with a mouth full of instruments and latexed fingers is not my idea of fun. Inevitably at some awkward moment, when nothing more can fit in my mouth, the dentist will ask a question. Which finger or instrument do I spit out in order to reply? "Ah huh, your teeth are fine but you need to see the oral hygienist". Is this a money making racket or a polite way of saying - 'I can see what you had for lunch?' Soon more latexed fingers and pipes enter my mouth. High powered jets spray water, and no doubt bits of lunch, over my face. I try to think of something else. Why haven't fruit flavoured gloves been invented? I remember the delicious fish I ate for lunch. But hey, wait a minute; fish also have oral hygienists - cleaner fish. But unlike me, they seem to enjoy the hygienists' services - even visiting them 3 or more times a day.

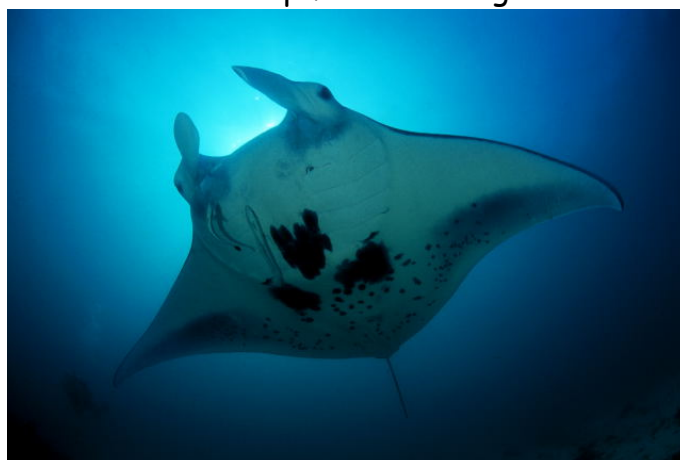


But why would a fish need cleaning, after all they bath in water all day and why would a 1 inch fish happily swim into the gullet of a 500kg predator? How does a fish know when the clinic is open? Who operates it and what is the fee? Luckily, scientists and ichthyologists can answer these who, what, why, whens and hows of basic fish hygiene. Fish suffer from parasitic infestations, scale rot, dead skin and excessive slime, to name but a few curable ailments. Since fish don't have fingers or nails to pick and scratch and it's not always wise to have a good rub in the sand as the broken shells and rough stones can cause deep cuts and abrasions, they need the assistance of cleaners to stay healthy.



In the aquatic world everyone and everything needs grooming and cleaning -from the smallest to the biggest fish; moray eels, turtles, manta rays, whales and even sharks. Sharks don't worry about the dental hygienist - they just replace their teeth neither do they have time to stop for a thorough

grooming as they need a constant flow of water over their gills to stay alive. Their personal hygienists have to travel with them. Remoras and shark suckerfish latch on with a suck comparable to an Electrolux removing unwelcome guests etc in the process. Remoras may also travel with turtles, whales and mantas. The majestic manta rays pride themselves in a full makeover enjoying both the freelance hitchhikers and also the meticulous preening found at a cleaning station. They too don't physically stop but



rather go into neutral gliding near schools of cleaner fish. They have learnt that many fish make light work. The mantas cousins, the smaller eagle and devil rays, hurtle



themselves out of the ocean at speed. Their wings smack the surface with force on re-entry. The impact loosens some of the larger pesky parasites but this is way too energetic and risky for most hence a visit to the cleaner fish is the preferred choice.





A cleaner fish's underwater health care facility is very basic. The premises are usually situated in a sheltered area of a coral reef with no leather couches, glaring headlights and noisy machines. These venues seldom change over the years even if the original proprietor moves on to the Big Reef in the Sky. The implements used may be simple - pucker lips, sharp incisors and nifty pincers, yet the services offered are extensive. These range from parasite picking to dead skin removal or exfoliation,



gill vacuuming, teeth whitening, wound treatment and general grooming. Whether they operate as health clinics, beauty salons or simply cleaning stations, the hours of service are primarily regular office hours i.e. daylight hours. Only shrimp cleaners do night duty offering nocturnal creatures a spruce before a night on the town. The cleaners never discriminate even though they have their preferences. Big fish, small fish, bad skin, bad breathe or bad teeth - everyone gets the same free service.



Clinics lack the signage to advertise their services. The cleaner fish themselves have to attract their customers. Sometimes they do this by swimming insanely in circles or back

and forth as though they have forgotten where they're going and what they're doing. The bizarre behaviour distracts fish who need to be lured close to the sanctity of the reef where both customer and clinician are somewhat protected from predatory attacks.

Fish waiting patiently to be cleaned often adopt strange positions to indicate their need for a service. They may hang motionless in the vicinity of the clinic or adopt a tail stand position. If that doesn't work, they may resort to





colour changes but a wide open mouth with extended jaws is the most obvious clue. Perhaps fish think that the most abnormal stance will attract the beauticians' attention the fastest - it's worth a try. There must always be some fear that a cleaner is going to get eaten. Sometimes it does happen by mistake. Whilst the cleaner is working the inside of a gullet the customer may experience a bit of pain or a tickle, take a gasp and oops - the cleaner is history. But generally customers are so relaxed about being cleaned that they even stop breathing to allow their gills and gill rakers to be inspected and

preened.

The demographics of the clinic staff are primarily wrasse, neon gobies and shrimps while species of butterflyfish, hogfish and angelfish are sometimes employed. Some of the staff at these clinics are part time employees, working as casuals in their junior years. As they reach adulthood their tastes become refined and they seek tastier meals on their menus. Hogfish are an example of this. Most of the wrasse cleaners are full time or obligate cleaners. Then there are the chancers - mimic blennies. These blighters resemble the



hardworking blue streaked cleaner wrasse. Only they have no interest in cleaning, they are out for a quick buck or in this case - a quick bite. True to their name mimic blennies mimic both the colouration and behaviour of the wrasse luring unsuspecting customers into believing they will receive a manicure but in fact the mimic blennie bites into healthy flesh.

Fish get injured really easily. Maybe they are the one who got away, or maybe they misjudged the sharpness of reef. Perhaps they were stabbed by urchin's spines sharing the same nook in the reef or the wounds were acquired during



battle over women, territory or food? Whatever the cause, wounds fester, especially if left warm and wet. It's no different with humans than fish. This is when the cleaners become nurses diligently pecking and removing dead tissue and scales, bacteria, fungi and excess mucus to promote wound healing and speedy recovery. Wounded fish have been noted to spend longer hours at the clinic until granulation of the wounds have taken place and new flesh is in the making.

The importance of cleaner fish on a reef has been debated over the years. In 1961 Conrad Limbaugh did experiments on a reef in the Bahamas. He physically removed all the cleaners from a reef and monitored the outcome. The fish population dwindled, the reef died and he surmised it was because the fish became sick from parasitic infestations. Other scientists have tried to duplicate this experiment but never with the



same result. I guess it's a big ocean and there are plenty more fish in the sea. Certainly aquarists will verify the need for cleaner fish to maintain a healthy tank.



The noise of the suction machine abruptly stops, my oral hygienist wipes the spray from my face. "Your teeth are clean, don't forget to floss every day and we will see you in 12 months time". Huh! It's so much easier for a fish.

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