

N.C. Plant and Animal Species Fact Sheets



Sea Squirt (*Styela plicata*)

Introduction

Otherwise known as a tunicate, a name that comes from the outer part its body which is termed a tunic and is made of a type of cellulose (like in plants) , they are called sea squirts because if they are bothered they will squirt water out of one of their siphons in self defense.

Although they are invertebrates they have a notochord when they are a larva making them one of the most sophisticated invertebrate animals in the estuary.

What do they look like?

The tunicate is a brown irregular shaped mass that really doesn't look like an animal. They have two siphons, one at the top and another high on a side. There are also colonial sea squirts which share a tunic and some siphons but not organs.

Because of their appearance they are called sea pork.



How big are they?

Sea squirts are about 1-2.5 inches (2.54-6.35 cm)

Where do they live?

These animals can be found all over the estuary where there is something hard that

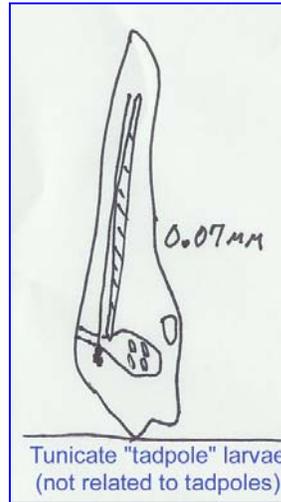
they can attach to. They are sessile animals meaning that they do not move.

Who eats them?

Sea squirts are eaten by fish, snails, sea stars and rays.

What do they eat?

As they are filter feeders, sea squirts feed on plankton.



How do they mate?

Tunicates can reproduce asexually through budding or sexually. They are hermaphroditic which means they are both male and female.

What are the young like?

They have free swimming larvae that look like tadpoles. They settle and attach to a surface.

People Interactions

Sea squirts are important to the ecosystem and filter the water which cleans it.

EstuaryLive

www.EstuaryLive.org

North Carolina National Estuarine Research Reserve

www.ncnerr.org or tel. 252.728.2170

Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Program

<http://www.apnep.org/> or tel. 252.946.6481

Carolina Estuarine Reserve Foundation

www.cerf.us



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