

Sunflower Seastar

Pycnopodia helianthoides

Photo from Monterey Bay Aquarium website: mbayaq.org



Description: Sunflower stars look very different from your average sea star. These sea stars can have over 20 arms! They begin life with only five arms and grow more arms as they mature. Sunflower stars can range in size to 3 feet long, from armtip to armtip. They have surprisingly soft skin with hard spines in colors ranging from purple to brown to orange to yellow.

Relatives: Sunflower stars are in the phylum Echinodermata and are related to other sea stars, brittle stars, urchins, sand dollars, and sea cucumbers.

Feeding: This sea star is a voracious predator, and one of the fastest sea stars in the ocean. The sunflower star has over 15,000 tube feet that help it travel over one meter per minute. The sunflower star's favorite foods include: eat crabs, sea cucumbers, snails, chitons, sea urchins, dead or dying squid and other sea stars.

Where they are found: Sunflower stars live in the low intertidal and subtidal zones and can be found from Alaska to San Diego.

WOW: Most sea stars have a one-piece skeleton. However, the sunflower star's skeleton is made up of disconnected pieces. These allow the sunstar's mouth to open wide and its body to enlarge and take in big prey. A sunflower star can swallow an entire sea urchin, digest it internally and then expel the urchin's test—its external shell.

At the tidepools: When you visit the shore, it's best just to look, not touch or disturb the animals and plants that live there. Persistent ill-treatment of a sunstar, or any marine animal, can leave it in poor condition.