

Plankton: tiny drifters: lesson 1 of 2

Meet the plankton

The tiniest life in the sea, and why it matters so much

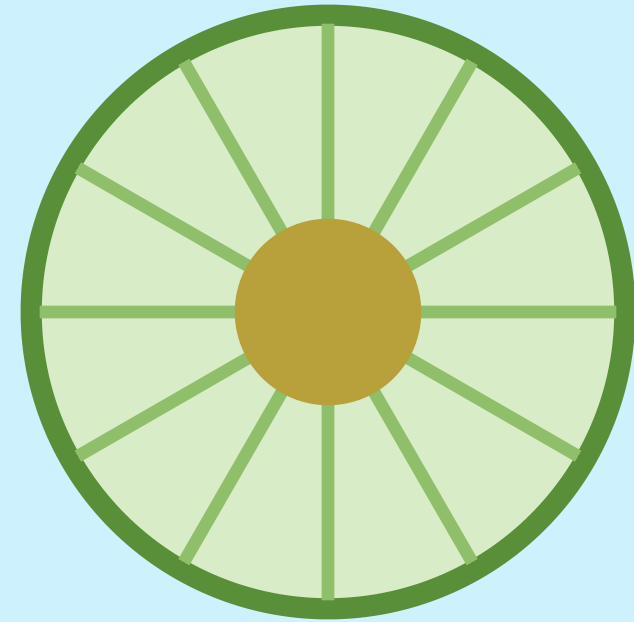
A whale shark, which eats plankton. Photo: MCP volunteers



What are plankton?

Plankton are living things that drift in the water. They can swim a little, but mostly they go wherever the currents take them.

The word comes from an old Greek word meaning wanderer or drifter. Most plankton are too small to see without a microscope.

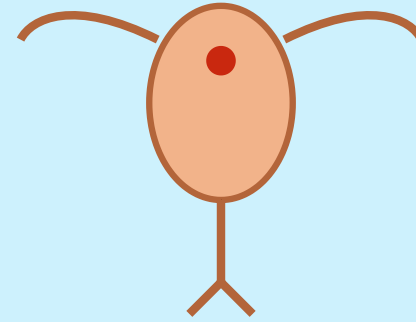


Two kinds of plankton



Phytoplankton

Plant-like. They use sunlight to make food, just like plants on land.



Zooplankton

Animals. They eat phytoplankton or each other.



Every second breath

about half

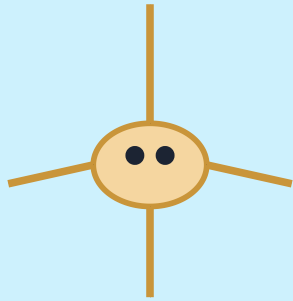
of the oxygen we breathe is made by phytoplankton

How we know: National Geographic. NOAA.



Babies in the plankton

Many sea animals spend the start of their lives as plankton.



Baby crabs

Start life as tiny spiky larvae drifting in the sea.



Baby fish

Many reef fish drift as larvae before settling on a reef.



Baby corals

Coral larvae drift for days, then settle and start a new colony.



Tiny food for giants



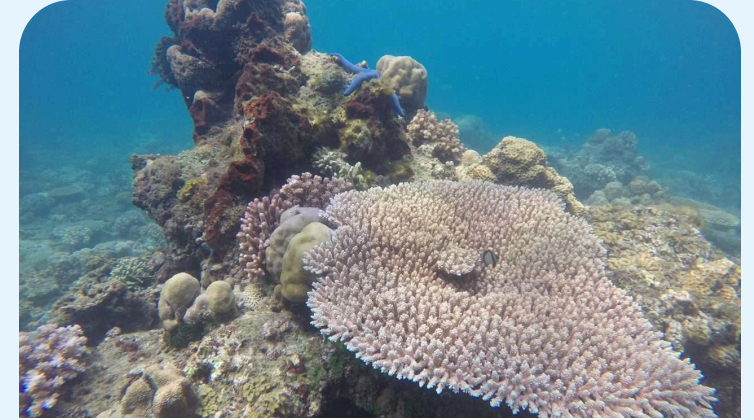
Whale shark

The biggest fish in the world eats plankton by sieving huge mouthfuls of water.



Manta ray

Swims with its mouth open, filtering plankton.



Corals

Catch zooplankton with their tentacles, mostly at night.



A plankton food chain

Almost all life in the sea depends on plankton.



The arrows show who is eaten by whom. Energy starts with sunlight.



Talk about it

Why do phytoplankton live near the surface?

What would happen to the whale shark if the plankton disappeared?

Draw your favourite plankton. What makes it special?

Next time: the plankton race



Photos and sources

Photos: whale shark by MCP volunteers. Manta, coral and coral fragment by MCP. Drawings made for this lesson. All illustrations drawn for this lesson by Marine Conservation Philippines.

Sources:

- National Geographic (2004). Source of half Earth's oxygen gets little credit.

Full links are in the teacher reading. Free to use and share for education. Made by Marine Conservation Philippines. More free lessons: marineconservationphilippines.org/resources/teachers-resources/

