

PARTING SHOT

By Richard Smith
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For many months, while doing research for my Ph.D. on the biology and conservation of pygmy seahorses, I had been trying to catch these tiny fish *in flagrante*. Reaching only three-fourths of an inch long as fully grown adults, it is perhaps not surprising that I had missed this most private of moments in the life of a pygmy. Luckily, however, only half an hour after watching a male Denise's pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus denise*) give birth, my patience finally paid off.

The male (right), still bearing stretch marks after releasing his previous brood, began to court his mate by vigorously shaking next to her. Moments later, the pair rose up from their seafan home and, following a few failed attempts, grasped each other by the tail. After a bond was established, the female (left), swollen with eggs, began to push the clutch into the male's brood pouch. The whole process lasted only 45 seconds before the couple separated.

I was able to confirm that, like their larger cousins, male rather than female pygmies do indeed brood the young. My research also highlighted the sensitivity of these animals to bright lights and the extremely delicate nature of their seafan homes. The best ways divers can reduce their impact are by limiting the number of photographs taken using a flash and avoiding contact with the seafan. AD



CAMERA: Nikon D2Xs in Subal housing, Nikon 105mm f/2.8 lens, Inon Z240 strobes

SETTINGS: 1/125 sec @ f/22, ISO 100

LOCATION: Wakatobi Dive Resort, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia