



Hazardous Marine Life

The beautiful waters of the Virgin Islands National Park offer a variety of activities to amaze and inspire visitors of all ages. When entering the ocean, you should be aware of the hazards you may encounter in this unknown environment. The marine creatures shown below are not usually aggressive toward humans. However, if threatened some of their natural defense mechanisms may be used against humans. With any encounter in the wild “**Look, But Don’t Touch!**” is the best approach. Do not touch, feed or harass marine life. Individual reactions to stings, abrasions and bites will vary significantly depending on a person’s health, age, physical condition, allergies or medications he or she is taking. Infection can occur with even the most benign marine injury.

******Medical attention should be sought immediately for any allergic reaction or wildlife bite.**



Long-spined sea urchin: These animals are commonly found around the reef, in seagrass beds or near rock piles on the sea floor. Injury is caused by an individual stepping on or bumping into the animal. The long spines can penetrate deeply into the flesh, break off and become imbedded in the skin. In some species venom is released when the spine punctures the skin. Redness, pain and swelling may occur. Spines are typically absorbed by the body in a few days. If infection occurs at the site, spines may have to be removed surgically. Soaking the wound in hot water may relieve the pain. Vinegar may be used to help dissolve the spine.



Fire Coral: Related to corals, jellyfish and anemones, fire corals are colonial hydroids equipped with strong stinging cells called nematocysts. Used to capture prey and for defense, the toxin-filled, harpoon-like nematocysts discharge only when touched. Fire coral has several forms and may take on a blade-like (shown) or encrusting appearance. Fire coral can be mustard-yellow to dark orange, often with white edges. It gets its name from the painful burning sensation felt when touched. Redness, tingling, itching, welts and allergic reaction may occur in some individuals. Rubbing alcohol or meat tenderizer may help alleviate the pain.



Southern Stingray: Stingrays are graceful non-aggressive animals that spend much of the time buried beneath the sand avoiding predators. Stingrays have one or more serrated venomous barbs located on top of the tail, used for defense. When stepped on, cornered or harassed a stingray will thrust its tail upward, imbedding its barb into the flesh of the offender. Symptoms include swelling, nausea, vomiting, excruciating pain, dizziness and weakness. Soaking in hot water may alleviate the pain. The barb should be removed by a medical professional. Shuffling the feet when entering the water will help avoid this injury.



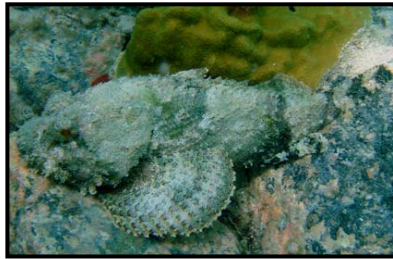
Jellyfish, Sea Wasps, Portuguese Man-Of-War: Not fish at all, these invertebrates have soft gelatinous bodies with long tentacles. They are related to corals, hydroids and anemones. On the end of each tentacle are hundreds of microscopic stinging cells called nematocysts which discharge when touched. Reactions can vary from mild stinging, itching and redness to severe allergic reaction and anaphylactic shock. Tentacles must be removed from skin or nematocysts will continue to fire. Bare hands should not be used to remove tentacles. Vinegar may relieve the pain inflicted by certain species.



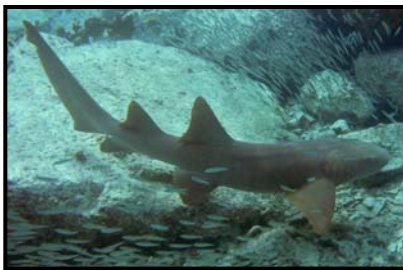
Great Barracuda: Unprovoked attacks from these large cigar-shaped fish are very rare. Agile and fast swimmers, barracuda are territorial and extremely curious. They may rapidly approach swimmers. They are attracted to shiny, reflective objects that resemble their preferred food, silvery fish. Their teeth are razor sharp and can inflict great injury. Removing jewelry is recommended when swimming. Do not feed or harass barracuda.



Eels: There are several species of eels found in the Virgin Islands. They live primarily in rock piles, under coral ledges and in caves. These animals are nocturnal, hunting mainly at night. Their vision is poor so they rely on their sense of smell for food. Eels are not aggressive by nature but can attack if provoked. Sudden movements next to an eel can cause an eel to attack. Feeding eels may also lead to attack. Never attempt to touch or harass an eel. Do not stick hands in rock crevasses or holes. Eels have high levels of bacteria in their mouth and bites can be severe and cause infection.



Scorpionfish: These hard to spot fish rely on their excellent camouflage to help blend into seagrass, coral reef and rocky habitats. The dorsal, anal and pectoral fins are lined with venomous spines. Contact with the spines can cause swelling, intense pain, vomiting, rapid breathing and heart rate and loss of consciousness. Shuffling the feet when entering the water and not touching the sea floor can help prevent injury from a scorpionfish. Soaking the affected area in hot water may alleviate the pain.



Sharks: Unprovoked shark attacks are extremely rare in the Virgin Islands. Use the buddy system when swimming. Avoid waters being fished, where fish are being cleaned or where lots of bait fish are present. Avoid swimming at night or at dusk and dawn when sharks are most active. Remove shiny jewelry before entering the water. Do not enter the water if you are bleeding. Never attempt to feed, touch or harass a shark. Move out of the area or exit the water if a shark approaches too close, makes sudden movements or appears agitated. If bitten seek medical attention immediately.



Coral Cuts & Abrasions: Corals are soft bodied animals that secrete a calcium carbonate skeleton. Contact with this rigid, sharp-edged coral skeleton can cause severe damage to the coral and scrapes, deep cuts and possible serious infection to you. To avoid injury always maintain a comfortable distance from the reef. Be aware of currents and waves which can push you into the reef. Pay attention to where your feet are when snorkeling so corals aren't accidentally kicked. Rock piles and dead coral skeletons provide homes for baby corals often too small to see. Stand only in sand. Clean wound thoroughly.



Fire/Bristle Worm: These animals are commonly found under boulders and coral during the day and foraging on the reef at night. Occasionally they will move about the reef or in seagrass beds during the day. Their fuzzy appearance comes from the thousands of fine venom-filled, needle-like bristles which can break off and become embedded in the skin. Symptoms can include pain, burning, itching and redness. Bristles may be removed by using adhesive tape. Ammonia may help relieve pain



Hydroids: Hydroids are related to jellyfish, anemones and corals. Resembling feathery plants, hydroids are actually colonies of animals equipped with strong stinging cells called nematocysts. Used to capture prey and for defense, the venom-filled, harpoon-like nematocysts discharge only when touched. Hydroid colonies attach to rocks and plants. They are also common on docks, buoys and mooring lines. Contact with hydroids may cause burning, itching, inflammation, swelling and pain. Sunburn and hot water may increase the symptoms.



Touch-me-not sponge: These stiff sponges are rust, brown or orange in color. They are usually found attached to the bottom in water over 30 ft. They may also be attached to mangrove prop roots or in coral rubble. Like all sponges, this species has fiberglass like spines called spicules that imbed in the skin if touched. This sponge contains a toxin which may cause burning, itching, swelling and redness. Spicules may be removed with adhesive tape. Vinegar may help relieve the burning sensation.

Photos by Carrie Stengel, Dr. Caroline Rogers and NPS staff