Ichthyology Encyclopedia Article

Ichthyology

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Contents

Ichthyology Encyclopedia Article.....1

Contents.....2

Ichthyology.....3

Ichthyology

Ichthyology is the science of animals that deals with fish. This field includes the study of fish growth, development, structure, characteristics, classification, geographical distribution, and the relationship of fish to their environment. The science of ichthyology was evolved in Europe during the eighteenth century. However, the Chinese were studying fish (with the intention to propagate them) at least ten centuries before the birth of Christ. There are also recorded observations on the varieties, habits, and qualities of various fish by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans.

Today, ichthyologists strive to answer questions like, "How long can a fish live?" and "How big can a fish grow?" Although these questions may sound simple, the answers are based on a multitude of factors. And while it may be true that most fish live between sixteen and twenty years, it is much more difficult to predict size because fish growth never stops. Generally, fish get a little longer and a little thicker every year. One of the largest fish, a 13.7-meter (45-foot) whale shark caught off Florida's Atlantic coast in 1912, was recorded at a weight of 20 tons.

One of the best places to study fish is the national fish collection, housed at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. The collection is the largest in the world and contains approximately eight million species from all over the world. The collection continues to grow as specimens are added from parts of the world where the fish **fauna** is poorly recognized or understood. Zoologists from the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Department of Commerce are permanently stationed at the museum, and they work closely with the specimens, focusing primarily on commercially important species.

Bibliography

Lagler, Karl F., John E. Bardach, and Robert R. Miller. *Ichthyology.* New York: JohnWiley & Sons, Inc., 1967.