



Parrotfish

A bright turquoise fish swims lazily beneath the water's surface, nibbling on the living coral. Suddenly, a wispy cloud of matter is emitted from under its tail. This colorful reef inhabitant is the parrotfish, or uhu, whose eating habits are helping to form many Hawaiian beaches. The cloudy emission is fine particles of crunched coral. Parrotfish are among the biggest producers of coral sand in the tropical world. A large parrotfish can produce hundreds of pounds of sand each year!

This blunt-headed fish is named for its teeth, which are fused into a beak-like mouth. The Hawaiian name for one of the seven species found in the state translates to "loose bowels," probably in reference to the plumes of sand it excretes while eating.

Parrotfish are often brilliant turquoise and green, but may also be tinged with red or other rainbow coloring. They are big fish, ranging from one to three feet in length. They use their teeth to scrape seaweed or algae from coral, sometimes biting off chunks of coral in the process. It is not unusual for snorkelers or scuba divers to hear them crunching underwater.

At night, these wily fish hide among the rocks, where they may swath themselves in a cocoon of mucous to ward off night predators. They are also hermaphrodites. The largest, dominant fish transforms into a male and turns blue; the remaining fish are often red females and juveniles. If the male dies, the most dominant female transforms into a male, even changing its color to blue.

Hawaiian folklore includes many references to the uhu. This was a favorite eating fish among ancient Hawaiians and when a fisherman saw two parrotfish rub noses, he believed it meant that flirting may be going on at home. Many Hawaiian sayings about uhu relate to longing or admiration. The uhu is a tasty, attractive fish so comparing a person to the uhu is complimentary, suggesting the person will be satisfying. However, the uhu excretes a mucous secretion making them difficult to catch, so comparing a person to the uhu can also suggest the person is wily and difficult to catch off-guard or trip up.

See pages 21–25 for ethical viewing tips.