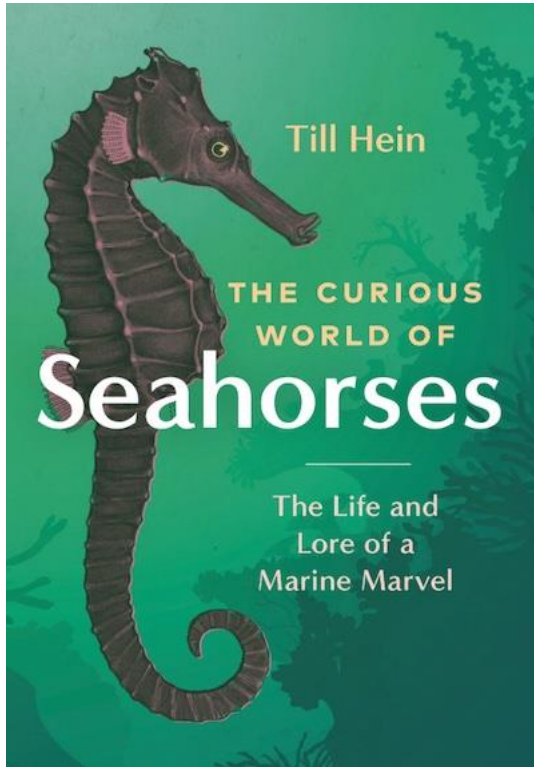


## The Curious World of Seahorses: The Life and Lore of a Marine Marvel

Author Interviewed by [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today / Animal Emotions](#)  
September 2023



Available from [Greystonebooks](#)

When I first learned about science writer Till Hein's [new book](#) *The Curious World of Seahorses: The Life and Lore of a Marine Marvel*, I couldn't wait to get my hands on it. As I read it, my learning curve was vertical and I kept saying, "I didn't know that!"

Seahorses are tiny fishes and there are about 50 different species. They're [social, romantic, and efficient hunters](#), and its males who get [pregnant](#). Concerning their romantic proclivities, we are told:

"Every morning, seahorse couples engage in ritualistic dances to greet each other, moving through intricate, rhythmic sequences of twists and twirls for minutes to hours on end. While we humans may schedule dates with romantic prospects to analyze our compatibility and get to know each other better, seahorses prove we're not the only species that 'date!' They engage in their daily dances to strengthen their romantic bond, ensure their reproductive cycles are properly synced and to verify each day that their partner is both still fervently committed and, frankly, alive."

I'm very pleased Till could answer a few questions on his fascinating new book about these charming fishers.

**Marc Bekoff: Why did you write *The Curious World of Seahorses*?**

Till Hein: I regularly write articles for the popular German print magazine "Mare" about fascinating subjects like ice sharks, albatrosses, mangrove killifish, hagfish and whales. They also publish books and one day the editors asked me whether I would be interested in writing a nonfiction book about seahorses. Obviously I was delighted, because these animals are so cute! But then I hesitated: "What do seahorses do all day?" I asked myself. Maybe they are more like models than, let's say, actors: very good looking, but with no gripping story? I called several marine biologists and fish experts in Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia and I learned there is a lot of very interesting research going on concerning seahorses. Seahorses are fish, although they don't look very fishy.

**MB: For example?**

TH: For instance, why, when, and how did it happen, that male seahorses started to give birth to their babies, which is unique in the whole animal kingdom? How does the design of the hindquarters of seahorses serve in robotics as a model for robust and flexible prehensile devices? Why do seahorse couples dance together for up to nine hours a day? What is the point of all of the acoustic communication between seahorses? Which role do marine horses play in traditional medicine and religions? But to come back to your opening question, unfortunately the greatest enemy of these enchanting individualists of the sea is *Homo sapiens*.

So, an important [motivation](#) for writing this book was the hope that growing knowledge about these animals might help to save them from extinction and even help to prevent the whole endangered ecosystems of our oceans from collapsing.<sup>1</sup>

**MB: Who is your intended audience?**

TH: I would like to reach everybody from the age of 15 to 115 years. Some chapters, for example the one about the strange hunting techniques of seahorses or the "tricky taxonomy," might be a bit more "scientific" than others. But in general, the book is an easy read, more informational than academic. I hope readers will learn a lot about seahorses and how they have inspired the human civilisation for thousands of years. But my main goal is to entertain the readers, make them have a good time, and give them ideas for funny conversations at dinner parties.

**MB: What are some of the topics you weave into your book and what are some of your major messages?**

TH: There are so many interesting topics I encountered while doing my research: ecology, aquatics, paternity, and taxonomy, and also cultural history, traditional medicine, [magical thinking](#), pop culture, protective measures like the "seahorse hotels" at Sydney Harbour, as well as the idea of [monogamy](#) in the animal kingdom. The major message of the book? Well, I think that humans could learn a lot from these animals, for example about relationship maintenance, wellness, work-life balance, dancing, emancipation, and sustainable mobility.

**MB: How does your book differ from others that are concerned with some of the same general topics?**

TH: Most nonfiction books about seahorses only focus on the biology and taxonomy of these animals. As a historian and science journalist, I was interested in a more general perspective.

On the other hand, seahorses are a good species for projections. The beauty of these animals and especially anecdotes about their strict loyalty to their partner often provoke a kind of a romanticism. I really like these animals too. But seahorses are no angels and some of them have a love triangle, as scientists recently found out. Several aspects of their life are totally bizarre. They are in many ways better suited for a comedy than for a hagiography.

**MB: Nevertheless, you are hopeful that as people learn more about seahorses, they will come to regard them and other sea creatures with more respect?**

TH: Yes, I do. And I think that is no contradiction. From my point of view, fishes are in general underestimated, especially seahorses. Imagine for example that one male Big-Belly Seahorse (*Hippocampus abdominalis*) can give birth to up to 2,000 babies within only a few hours! Seahorse couples meet every morning to dance together. Some species of seahorses can change their colors according to their moods, for example, from purplish red with pink knobs to yellow with orange-colored bumps, while another species show either black stripes, yellow dots, or a green-gray camouflage pattern. And though dwarf seahorses (*Hippocampus zosterae*) are said to be "the slowest fish in the world," seahorses are very efficient hunters and found a clever way to spread out thousands of miles away from the probable place of their origin, near the Australian Coasts. They are impressive artists of life!