

HIDDEN IN THE SHADOWS: SPINY LOBSTERS, LOBSTERS AND SLIPPER LOBSTERS





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The shaded areas are those located at a depth of more than 25 metres, where the subdued sunlight reaches, and also in shallower waters in the shadows between walls and rocky bottoms, as well as in caves and tunnels.

With an absence of light, algae and the posidonia disappear and the seabed is covered with filtering organisms, often with vivid colours which we won't discover until we illuminate them with our torch, and on the seabed, there are many other camouflaged animals to either protect themselves or keep on the watch for their predators.

This environment is the habitat of large crustaceans such as spiny lobsters, European lobsters and slipper lobsters, which we will find hidden in holes, caves, overhangs and in the darker nooks and crannies.

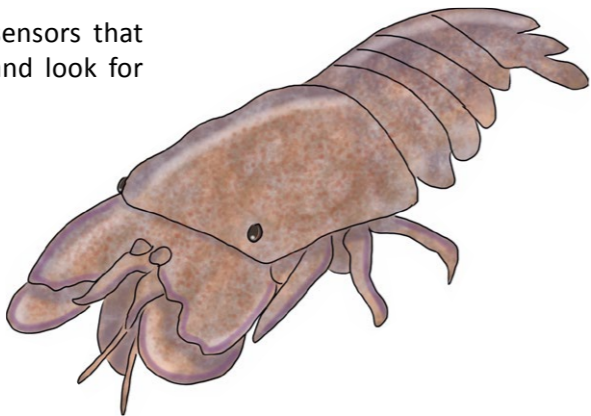
SPINY LOBSTERS, EUROPEAN LOBSTERS AND SLIPPER LOBSTERS

They are all large crustaceans, up to 40 centimetres long, and they have a strong aversion to the light. Not only do they live in the shadows, they also hide from the little light that arrives during the day looking for refuge in the crevices, and they come out of their hiding places to search for food at night.

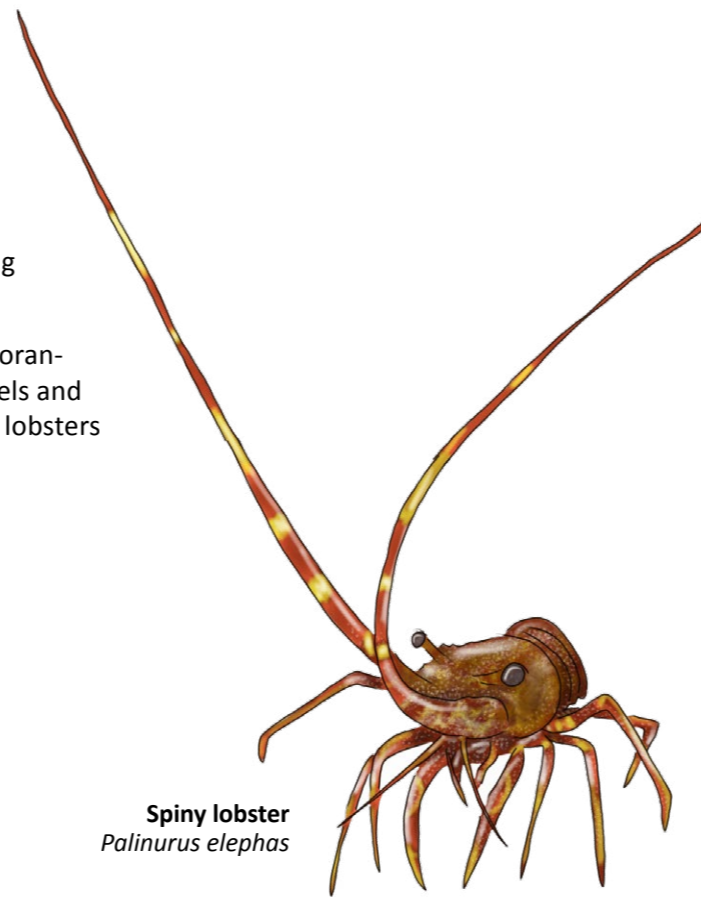
Spiny lobsters have long antennas that can double the size of the body, and they are reddish orange in colour. Slipper lobsters don't have antennas, but rather structures that resemble shovels and a light brown colour that makes them go unnoticed in their hiding places and the European lobsters have two powerful claws that make them unmistakable.

All three have legs covered with sensors that allow them to orient themselves and look for food despite the lack of light.

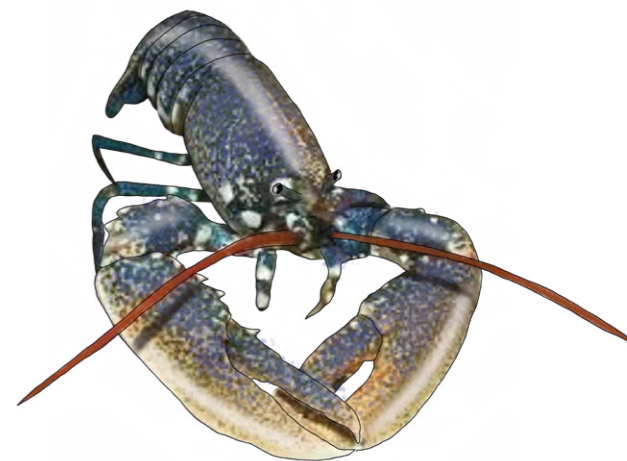
Slipper lobster
Scyllarus sp.



Spiny lobster
Palinurus elephas



European lobster
Homarus gammarus



AN EXQUISITE MEAL FOR BOTH HUMANS AND FISH

Spiny lobsters, European lobsters and slipper lobsters are crustaceans that are highly appreciated gastronomically and for that reason they have long been a popular catch for fishermen. In addition, and despite their thick carapace and the spikes that cover parts of their bodies, they are also a popular meal for many fish, including groupers and octopuses, which include them in their diet whenever possible.

In fact, this is why they are much more active at night and hide in the shadows during the day: to stay out of sight from potential predators.

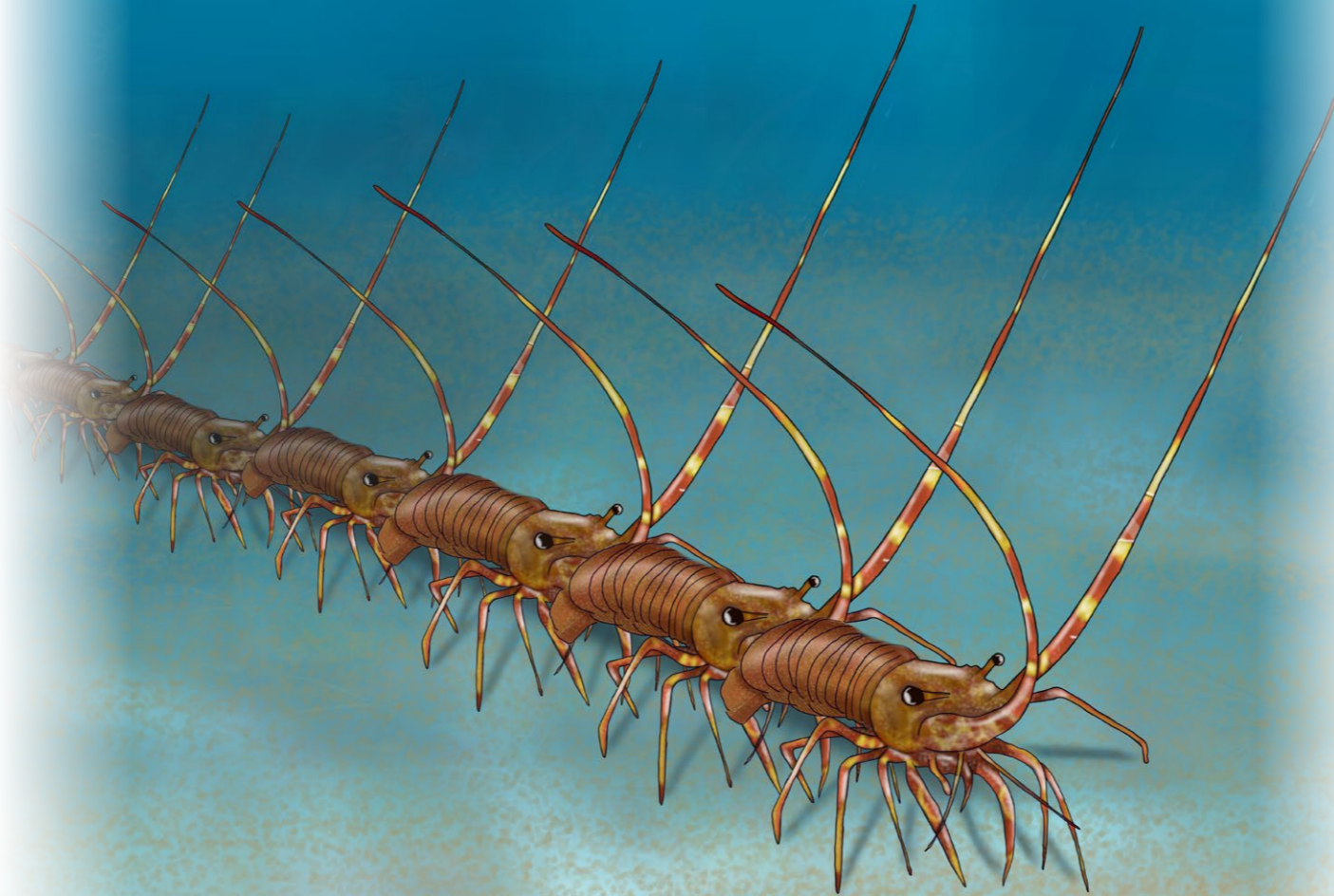
Although they are now less abundant, we can still see the three species today, especially in protected areas and seabeds, far from the threat of underwater fishermen; they are usually young specimens and small in size and we only find the larger specimens at great depths.

A TAILOR-MADE SUIT

The shells of the spiny lobsters, slipper lobsters and European lobsters, like that of all crustaceans, is an exoskeleton, which has to renew itself as they grow.

When they lose the outer cover they already have the new shell prepared below it, but this one has to be exposed to the elements in order to acquire the necessary robustness. This process can last for hours, and it's when they are most vulnerable.

Thus, the renewal of this tailor-made suit, which when young happens several times a year, is a time of great risk and usually develops out of sight of their predators and divers.



MYTH OR REALITY?

Occasionally, the older and most experienced divers boast having caught sight of numerous groups of lobsters walking along the seabed together and in the same direction, as well as large concentrations covering the seabed, with layers of these crustaceans walking on top of each other.

This anecdote, which today seems an exaggeration to the younger divers and almost a myth, is in fact true.

Why is not possible or at least extremely difficult, to find these concentrations nowadays? There are two conditions that seem to have motivated this change, on the one hand the pressure on the population of lobsters has been so great that both the concentrations and the associated migrations have decreased, and on the other hand, the survivors (now fewer specimens) have moved out to a greater depth, where it is more difficult to observe them.

Overfishing and poaching have made these animals rare specimens (particularly the adults), which must be appreciated when they are seen.



WHERE TO SEE SPINY LOBSTERS, EUROPEAN LOBSTERS AND SLIPPER LOBSTERS

We can see them from depths of between 15-20 metres, in rocky areas and hidden away in holes, ledges, sills and cracks, although the European lobsters prefer holes and caves on the edges between the rock and the sand or the muddy seabed.

They all become active when night falls, it is therefore in night dives when it will be possible to see them searching for food.

Their natural habitat is extensive, and although overfishing has made them scarcer and more difficult to find, they are territorial, which is why your guides can help you locate them.

HOW TO SEE THEM

To see them we will have to patiently examine the wall with the help of a torch. Spiny lobsters are the easiest to distinguish, not only because of their more vibrant colour when illuminated, but also because their antennae can double their body size and can often be detected protruding from the hiding place.

PRECAUTIONS

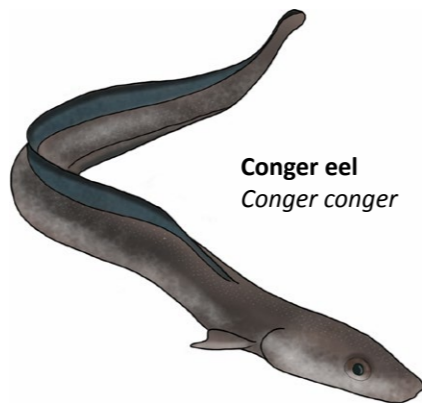
The fact that they live in caves and holes makes us have to monitor our buoyancy carefully so as not to damage other organisms with an unlucky kick with our fins.

We should never try to remove them from the hole or touch the antennas, it is obvious that if we did so we could affect their life cycle and make them exposed to predators. In addition, we would damage the sensors in the antennas which help them to locate food in the darkness of the night.

ALSO...

Sometimes we find European lobsters sharing their den with conger eels. This association is explained because the conger eel eat octopuses, the European lobsters' largest predator next to humans.

All three, the spiny, slipper and European lobsters swim by propelling themselves with powerful tail movements, a mechanism that they use mainly when they have to escape.



Conger eel
Conger conger





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