Living together on the reef

PHOTO STUDY 1 • Look closely before you explain

A cleaning visit





Small cleaner fish approach much larger fish, including the area beside a gill opening.

Discuss: How could both animals benefit from a cleaning interaction?

Ages 6–8: Point to the smaller fish and the larger fish.

Ages 9–12: Explain a possible benefit for each fish. What behaviour would you need to observe?

Photographs: Troy Mayne • b024(1).jpg, b034(1).jpg

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PHOTO STUDY 2 • Look closely before you explain

Working close to a moray





Shrimps are close to moray eels' heads and mouths in these two scenes.

Discuss: List one observation and one question about what the shrimp gains.

Ages 6–8: Find the shrimp near the moray's head.

Ages 9–12: Separate the shrimp's visible position from an explanation of what it is doing.

Photographs: Troy Mayne • b062.jpg, b067.jpg

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PUPIL WORKSHEET • Write, draw or discuss your answers

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Draw a cleaner and a larger animal. Label both.

2. Draw an arrow to each animal and explain what it may gain from cleaning.

3. Write one observation and one question you would investigate before deciding that cleaning is happening.

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TEACHER NOTES • Suggested answers and sources

Learning goal: Use cleaning interactions to explore how two different animals can benefit from living together.

Time: 30–40 minutes. **You need:** the photo pages, the worksheet and pencils. Project the photographs or share printed copies; print only page 3 for each pupil.

Teach: Observe quietly, compare ideas in pairs, then discuss as a class. Younger pupils can point, draw or dictate. Older pupils should explain their evidence and identify uncertainties.

Photo discussion

Page 1: Cleaner fish can obtain food by removing parasites or other material, while the client benefits from their removal. That is a mutualistic interaction. The photographs show positions; close observation of feeding would strengthen the explanation for each visit.

Page 2: An observation might describe a shrimp's position on the jaw. A question might ask whether it is removing parasites, dead tissue or other food. Cleaner relationships depend on what the animals do and how each is affected.

Worksheet guidance

In a cleaning interaction, a cleaner can gain food while a client benefits from the removal of parasites or other material. A relationship in which both benefit is called mutualism.

Position alone is not proof of cleaning. A sequence showing removal and feeding would provide stronger evidence than a single still image. Avoid describing all animals close together as friends.

Check learning: Ask each pupil for one observation, one explanation and one question still to investigate.

Useful words: client: the animal being cleaned; parasite: an organism that lives on or in a host and benefits at its expense; mutualism: an interaction benefiting both participants.

Sources and photograph record

Adapted from Troy Mayne's WRG teacher manuscript, photo studies C01, C03. The original photographs are reproduced in full. Source links checked 1 November 2026.

Australian Museum — Common Cleanerfish