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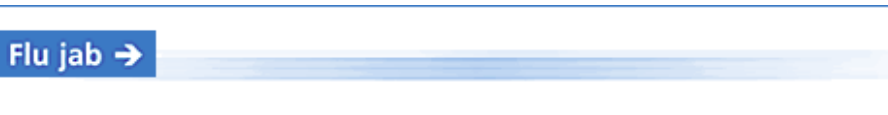
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Justice of travesty: Sex-changing animals obey nature's laws

Agence France-Presse
Paris, October 23

Species that automatically change sex do so when they reach nearly three-quarters of their maximum size, neatly proving a cornerstone of evolutionary theory, scientists say.

Dozens of animals species, from types of fish and crustaceans to molluscs and worms, spontaneously change sex as a result of the pressures for survival and reproduction.

In the case of the clownfish, a favourite of aquarium-lovers, the gender-bending is taken to extremes -- males can not only switch to female, but also increase in size to become the alpha-breeder in their piscatorial group.

Biologists David Allsop and Stuart West of Edinburgh University in Scotland studied 77 sex-changing species, ranging from a tiny shrimp, the *Thor manningi*, to a five-foot fish called a black grouper.

They found that the creatures swapped gender when they reached 72 per cent of maximum size, regardless of mating system, sex-change mechanism and other factors.

"This suggests that there is a fundamental similarity across all animals... In the underlying forces that select for sex change," they write in today's issue of *Nature*, the British weekly science journal.

Under evolutionary theory, an individual is at most pressure to change gender when there is a serious imbalance between the sexes and it has reached an age and size where it can do the switch successfully and contribute quickly to the gene pool.

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