

Scope: Global Language: English



# Hippocampus patagonicus, Patagonian Seahorse

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# **Taxonomy**

| Kingdom  | Phylum   | Class          | Order           | Family       |  |
|----------|----------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|--|
| Animalia | Chordata | Actinopterygii | Syngnathiformes | Syngnathidae |  |

Taxon Name: Hippocampus patagonicus Piacentino & Luzzatto, 2004

### Common Name(s):

• English: Patagonian Seahorse, Patagonian Sea-horse

• Spanish: Caballito de Mar Patagónico

### **Taxonomic Source(s):**

Piacentino, G. L. M. and Luzzatto, D. C. 2004. *Hippocampus patagonicus* sp. nov., nuevo caballito de mar para la Argentina (Pisces, Syngnathiformes). *Revista del Museo Argentino de Ciencias Naturales* 6(2): 339-349.

#### **Taxonomic Notes:**

This species was likely misidentified as *Hippocampus erectus* prior to its description in 2004.

## **Assessment Information**

Red List Category & Criteria: Vulnerable A2cd ver 3.1

Year Published: 2017

**Date Assessed:** September 27, 2016

## Justification:

Hippocampus patagonicus is a coastal species of seahorse that inhabits waters from northeastern Brazil to Chubut, Argentina. The major habitats occupied by the species include seagrasses, macroalgae, and sheltered areas with sessile invertabrates. The species is threatened by habitat degradation and loss from coastal development and destructive fishing practices, targeted exploitation, and by being caught extensively as bycatch in shrimp trawl fisheries. Based on declining habitat quality, extent of occurrence, and declines reported by fishers, it is inferred that the population has undergone a decline of at least 30%. Therefore Hippocampus patagonicus is listed as Vulnerable under criterion A2cd.

# **Geographic Range**

## **Range Description:**

Hippocampus patagonicus occurs in the Southwest Atlantic Ocean off the coasts of Brazil and Argentina (Piacentino and Luzzatto 2004, Boehm *et al.* 2013), with a range likely extending from Recife, Pernambuco to Puerto Madryn, Chubut (Luzzatto *et al.* 2012, Boehm *et al.* 2013, Silveira *et al.* 2014, Pereira *et al.* 2016, R. Silveira pers. comm. 2016). The species occurs from shallow depths to 120 m (Rosa *et al.* 2011; Luzzatto *et al.* 2012, 2014).

### **Country Occurrence:**

Native: Argentina (Buenos Aires, Chubut, Rio Negro); Brazil (Espírito Santo, Paraná, Rio de Janeiro, Rio

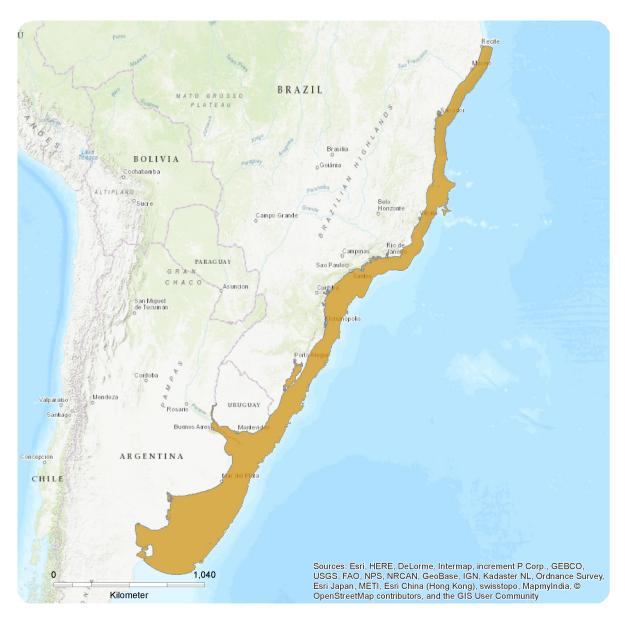
Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina); Uruguay

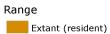
# **FAO Marine Fishing Areas:**

Native: Atlantic - southwest

# **Distribution Map**

Hippocampus patagonicus





#### Compiled by:

IUCN Seahorse, Pipefish & Stickleback Specialist Group



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply any official endorsement, acceptance or opinion by IUCN.



# **Population**

To date there has been no dedicated range-wide surveys or population estimates for this species. The species appears to occur patchily, but studies in areas where these seahorses are found indicate densities of between 0.005 individuals/m² and 0.057 ind/m² (Luzzatto 2006, IBAMA 2011, Giacardi and Reyes 2012). It's not clear how these numbers would scale up for a full population estimate, as the areas surveyed were not randomly selected.

The population is inferred to have declined in San Antonio Bay by 90% over the past 30 years based on fisher interviews (some who reported declines of >99% and even local extirpation) and ongoing habitat degradation and loss (Rosa *et al.* 2011, Luzzatto unpublished data). This equates to a decline of at least 30% over ten years.

Historically, the species was commonly found in San Antonio Bay and its adjacent waters (Perier 1994). Now the population is restricted to a few areas of the bay (Giacardi and Reyes 2012).

**Current Population Trend:** Decreasing

# Habitat and Ecology (see Appendix for additional information)

Hippocampus patagonicus generally occur in shallow waters up to 15 m in depth in Argentina (Piacentino and Luzzatto 2004). In Brazil it can be found in deeper waters up to 120 m in depth (Rosa et al. 2011). They are found attached to marine algae, mainly on floating Sargassum species, and on seagrasses, artificial substrates, and sessile invertebrates such as sponges, ascidians, and polychaete worms (Kuiter 2009, Silveira et al. 2014, Luzzatto unpublished data). Hippocampus patagonicus are opportunistic predators, mainly feeding on amphipods (including Gammaridae, Caprellidae, and Hiperidae) and decapods, exhibiting no differences based on sex or size (Storero and Gonzalez 2008, Pujol 2014). Juveniles in San Antonio Bay have been reported demonstrating dispersive potential by rafting (Luzzatto et al. 2013). This evidence of a dispersive juvenile stage may explain records of this species in deeper waters, suggesting long-distance migration beyond original populations and explaining the wide distribution range of the species (Luzzatto et al. 2014). This behaviour may be cause for conservation concern, as rafting juveniles are susceptible to being trapped in seine nets (Luzzatto et al. 2013). As is the case with other seahorses, H. patagonicus is ovoviviparous, and males brood the young in a pouch prior to giving live birth (Foster and Vincent 2004). During spring and summer, individuals are more active and can be found pregnant or displaying mating behaviour (Perier 1994; Pujol 2014). Both males and females appear to reach maturity during the first breeding season after they are born, and captive specimens are mature at 6 months (D. C. Luzzatto unpublished data). Size at maturity is around 11 cm (Pujol 2014), and the species lives 2-3 years (D. C. Luzzatto unpublished data). The gestation time for this species is 19.6 ± 2.9 days (Luzzatto unpublished data), and newborn offspring are 0.7 cm in length (Storero and Gonzalez 2008). Brood size is 207+/-134 in captivity (Luzzatto et al. 2009).

Systems: Marine

### Use and Trade

Brazil is South America's main consumer of dry seahorses and is the largest source of seahorses from natural populations of *Hippocampus patagonicus* (Rosa et al. 2011, Vincent et al. 2011). *Hippocampus* 

patagonicus are sold as dried specimens for religious talismans and charms, curios, traditional medicine, and to a lesser extent, as live specimens for aquarium displays (Rosa *et al.* 2011). Captures are not reported and the dried trade is unregulated. Nevertheless, analysis of catch data from industrial shrimp trawler landings from 2002–2003 suggested that 1.2 million seahorses potentially entered the dried trade per annum, with a monthly mean catch rate of 801 ±532 seahorses (95% CI; range 0–14,400) per trawler (Rosa *et al.* 2011). No formal records of exported seahorses exist in Brazil, however, Customs records provide evidence that Brazil exported dried seahorses: in 2001 the Hong Kong Customs recorded the import of 240 kg of seahorses from Brazil, and in 2000 the United States Customs recorded the entry of 305 specimens of dried seahorses from Brazil (Rosa *et al.* 2011). Exports have occurred to Hong Kong, USA and Asia (IBAMA 2011, Rosa *et al.* 2011, Vincent *et al.* 2011). It is estimated that at minimum 120,000 seahorses were consumed annually from 2002-2009 in the domestic trade in Brazil (Rosa *et al.*, 2011). It's not clear how much *Hippocampus patagonicus* contributes to this trade.

Populations in Argentina have been exploited by divers, gatherers, and fisherfolk, resulting in dried specimens sold as souvenirs or as handicrafts, and to a lesser extent as live specimens for aquarium displays (Pujol 2014, Estalles et al. in review). In San Antonio Bay, the species has sustained a small-scale fishery that developed over the past 30 years (Gonzalez et al. 2014) and the specimens are sold as souvenirs or in handcrafts, and to a lesser extent live specimens for aquarium displays (Estalles et al in review). Local Livelihood: In southern Brazil when trawl fisheries targeting shrimps record low yield levels, fishers sustain their incomes selling high-value resources - fish and invertebrates obtained in the by-catch. Seahorses are a resource available for generating an extra income for many fishers (IBAMA 2011). About 13,000 people are directly involved in these fisheries (IBAMA 2011). In San Antonio Bay, seahorses are caught by subsistence fishers and local divers along with other marine taxa. In Mar del Plata, they are caught targeted and caught as by-catch in artisanal fisheries (Pujol 2014). In all cases, seahorses become an extra income for fishers. National Commercial Value: In Brazil, the prices paid for seahorses increased according to the level of trader involved, the size of the specimens, origin and the degree of preservation. Seahorses were sold at prices ranging from US\$0.02 to \$0.98 (level 1 traders; except during tourist season, when the price per specimen could reach US\$5.29) to US\$0.13-\$17.59 (end-sellers). Prior to 2005, each dried seahorse was sold to end-consumers on the domestic market for prices ranging from US\$0.13 to \$10.73, while in 2005 and 2009 prices ranged from US\$0.74 to \$17.59 (Rosa et al. 2011). In Argentina, the domestic market of H. patagonicus sells individuals at US\$4.00-\$7.50, depending on their size. Live specimens for aquarium display are sold at approximately US\$100, depending on the size and colour of the specimens (Estalles et al. in review). International Commercial Value: In 2001 the Hong Kong Customs recorded the import of 240 kg of seahorses from Brazil at a price of US\$44.87/kg, and in 2000 the United States Customs recorded the entry of 305 specimens of dried seahorses from Brazil, traded for a total of US\$816 (Rosa et al. 2011). It is not known how many of these specimens were of H. patagonicus, or how this trade affected wild populations. In San Antonio Bay, the reconstruction of historical data through interviews and current samplings indicate that the resource has declined 90% in 30 years (Luzzatto unpublished data). The causes of this decline may correspond not only to active fishing of adult specimens, but also a direct impact on recruitment and an indirect effect due to habitat degradation (Giacardi and Reyes 2012).

## **Threats** (see Appendix for additional information)

**Brazil:** Hippocampus patagonicus are collected and traded in Latin America as religious amulets, traditional medicines, curios, and as aquarium fishes (Rosa et al. 2011). They are under considerable fishing pressure, and are the most commonly caught seahorse species in the south and southeast regions of Brazil, predominantly as by-catch of industrial shrimp fisheries (Rosa et al. 2011, Vincent et al.

2011). Brazil is South America's largest consumer of dry seahorses, with the largest source of *Hippocampus patagonicus* (Rosa *et al.* 2011). In addition, habitat degradation by the shrimp fisheries of the *Sargassum* banks where seahorses are found, coastal urban development, and vessel traffic in sensitive areas all pose threats to the species (IBAMA 2011). **Argentina:** Seahorses in San Antonio Bay and in Mar del Plata were reportedly exploited to be sold as curios and for aquarium purposes (Luzzatto 2006, Pujol 2014, Estalles *et al.* in review). Rapid industrial and urban development in coastal areas has resulted in habitat degradation and retraction in San Antonio Bay (Luzzatto *et al.* 2012). Additionally, tourists and fishermen using seines accumulate large amounts of debris, often incidentally catching rafting juveniles, which would directly influence the species' recruitment (Luzzatto *et al.* 2012). In San Antonio Bay, the reconstruction of historical data through interviews to fishermen and local researchers and current samplings indicate that the resource has declined 90% over the past 30 years (Luzzatto unpublished data, Estalles *et al.* in review). In Mar del Plata the main threats identified were fishing to be sold as curios and for aquarium purposes, incidental fishing, contamination, habitat degradation and biological invasions (Pujol 2014).

# **Conservation Actions** (see Appendix for additional information)

The entire genus Hippocampus is listed on Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), with implementation in May 2004. In February 2004, The Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) implemented a quota of 250 specimens per species for the export of seahorses (Rosa et al. 2011). Quotas were established in a context of zero monitoring and zero enforcement (Rosa et al. 2011). Quotas were clearly violated by exporters, who received permission to export color morphs or misidentified species of Hippocampus as separate species. Additionally, as informed by one dealer of marine fishes, because the contents of the live fish shipments were not checked, when the maximum quota for seahorses was reached they were sold as another species (Rosa et al. 2011). There are no regulations or records for the domestic trade and use of seahorses. In Brazil, Hippocampus erectus is included in Appendix II of the Instruction No. 5 of the Ministry of the Environment (05/28/2004), which lists the aquatic invertebrate and fish species "Threatened with Extinction, Over-exploited or Threatened with Over-exploitation". The listing in Appendix II does not necessarily imply limitation to the use, but requires that the Brazilian government begin the implementation of a management plan for the species (IBAMA 2011). H. erectus is also considered vulnerable in the states of Espirito Santo and Rio de Janeiro, and in Sao Paulo, the species is considered threatened of overexploitation (IBAMA, 2011). In all these cases, legislation may actually be referring to Hippocampus patagonicus in light of the misidentification of the Brazilian species (Vincent et al. 2011, Boehm et al. 2013, Silveira et al. 2014).

In southern Brazil, the species seems to be associated with *Sargassum sp.* (IBAMA 2011), therefore areas with *Sargassum sp.* should be protected in order to protect *Hippocampus patagonicus*.

In Mar del Plata, the species has been declared a "Natural Monument", the maximum status of conservation in Argentina. This category prohibits any act or omission that directly or indirectly involves abuse, harm, capture or captivity of the species, except in the case of individuals collected for scientific purposes. In San Antonio Bay, the *Hippocampus patagonicus* population is located within a protected area, however, legislation is not always enforced.

Also in Mar del Plata, *Hippocampus patagonicus* is a flagship species used by "La ciencia hace escuela" www.maresyoceanos.com to educate the community about the importance of coastal ecosystems

integrated with the cultural heritage of the region (Vallarino *et al.* 2011). This program has established a permanent exhibition of seahorse's characteristics and conservations concerns at the Museo Municipal de Ciencias Naturales "Lorenzo Scaglia", conducted training courses for teachers and the general public, design and published educational material, including a book entitle "Cuadernos de educación ambiental: los caballitos de mar". Studies on the species have been increasing in recent years. Longterm monitoring, official records of the number of individuals caught in by-catch, and further research on the biology, ecology, habitat, abundance and distribution of this species is required to prioritize management actions for effective conservation.

# **Credits**

Assessor(s): Wei, J., Estalles, M., Pollom, R. & Luzzatto, D.

**Reviewer(s):** Ralph, G.

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### **External Resources**

For Images and External Links to Additional Information, please see the Red List website.

# **Appendix**

# **Habitats**

(http://www.iucnredlist.org/technical-documents/classification-schemes)

| Habitat   | Season | Suitability | Major<br>Importance? |
|---|--------|-------------|----------------------|
| 9. Marine Neritic -> 9.7. Marine Neritic - Macroalgal/Kelp                                    | -      | Suitable    | -                    |
| 9. Marine Neritic -> 9.9. Marine Neritic - Seagrass (Submerged)                               | -      | Suitable    | -                    |
| 15. Artificial/Aquatic & Marine -> 15.11. Artificial/Marine - Marine Anthropogenic Structures | -      | Suitable    | -                    |

# **Threats**

(http://www.iucnredlist.org/technical-documents/classification-schemes)

| Threat   | Timing   | Scope  | Severity                   | Impact Score        |
|--|--|--|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Residential & commercial development -> 1.1.  Housing & urban areas  | Ongoing  | Unknown  | Unknown                    | Unknown             |
|  | Stresses:  | 1. Ecosystem str   | esses -> 1.1. Ecosyste     | em conversion       |
|  |  | 1. Ecosystem str   | esses -> 1.2. Ecosyste     | em degradation      |
| 1. Residential & commercial development -> 1.2. Commercial & industrial areas  | Ongoing  | Unknown  | Unknown                    | Unknown             |
|  | Stresses:  | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.1. Ecosystem conversion   |                            |                     |
|  |  | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.2. Ecosystem degradation  |                            |                     |
| <ol> <li>Residential &amp; commercial development -&gt; 1.3.</li> <li>Tourism &amp; recreation areas</li> </ol>                          | Ongoing  | Unknown  | Unknown                    | Unknown             |
|  | Stresses:  | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.1. Ecosystem conversion   |                            |                     |
|  |  | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.2. Ecosystem degradation  |                            |                     |
| 11. Climate change & severe weather -> 11.1. Habitat shifting & alteration   | Ongoing  | Whole (>90%)   | Unknown                    | Unknown             |
|  | Stresses:  | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.1. Ecosystem conversion   |                            | em conversion       |
|  |  | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.2. Ecosystem degradation  |                            | •                   |
|  |  | 1. Ecosystem str   | esses -> 1.3. Indirect     | ecosystem effects   |
| 4. Transportation & service corridors -> 4.3. Shipping lanes   | Ongoing  | Unknown  | Unknown                    | Unknown             |
|  | Stresses: 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.2. Ecosyste |  | em degradation             |                     |
| 5. Biological resource use -> 5.4. Fishing & harvesting aquatic resources -> 5.4.1. Intentional use: (subsistence/small scale) [harvest] | Ongoing  | Majority (50-<br>90%)  | Slow, significant declines | Medium<br>impact: 6 |
|  | Stresses:  | 2. Species Stresses -> 2.1. Species mortality  |                            | ortality            |
|  |  | Species Stresses -> 2.3. Indirect species effects ->     2.3.7. Reduced reproductive success |                            |                     |
| 5. Biological resource use -> 5.4. Fishing & harvesting aquatic resources -> 5.4.4. Unintentional effects:                               | Ongoing  | Majority (50-<br>90%)  | Unknown                    | Unknown             |
| (large scale) [harvest]  |  |  |                            |                     |

|  |           | 1. Ecosystem  | stresses -> 1.2. Ecosy | stem degradation |
|--|-----------|---|------------------------|------------------|
|  |           | <ol> <li>Ecosystem stresses -&gt; 1.3. Indirect ecosystem effects</li> <li>Species Stresses -&gt; 2.1. Species mortality</li> <li>Species Stresses -&gt; 2.3. Indirect species effects -&gt; 2.3.7. Reduced reproductive success</li> </ol> |                        |                  |
|  |           |   |                        |                  |
|  |           |   |                        |                  |
| 9. Pollution -> 9.1. Domestic & urban waste water -> 9.1.1. Sewage                           | Ongoing   | Unknown   | Unknown                | Unknown          |
|  | Stresses: | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.1. Ecosystem conversion  |                        |                  |
|  |           | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.2. Ecosystem degradation   |                        |                  |
| 9. Pollution -> 9.1. Domestic & urban waste water -> 9.1.2. Run-off                          | Ongoing   | Unknown   | Unknown                | Unknown          |
|  | Stresses: | 1. Ecosystem  | stresses -> 1.1. Ecosy | stem conversion  |
|  |           | 1. Ecosystem  | stresses -> 1.2. Ecosy | stem degradation |
| 9. Pollution -> 9.3. Agricultural & forestry effluents -> 9.3.1. Nutrient loads              | Ongoing   | Unknown   | Unknown                | Unknown          |
|  | Stresses: | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.1. Ecosystem conversion  |                        | stem conversion  |
|  |           | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.2. Ecosystem degradation   |                        | stem degradation |
| 9. Pollution -> 9.3. Agricultural & forestry effluents -> 9.3.2. Soil erosion, sedimentation | Ongoing   | Unknown   | Unknown                | Unknown          |
|  | Stresses: | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.1. Ecosystem conversion  |                        |                  |
|  |           | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.2. Ecosystem degradation   |                        | stem degradation |

# **Conservation Actions in Place**

(http://www.iucnredlist.org/technical-documents/classification-schemes)

| Conservation Actions in Place                             |
|---|
| In-Place Research, Monitoring and Planning                |
| Action Recovery plan: No                                  |
| Systematic monitoring scheme: No                          |
| In-Place Land/Water Protection and Management             |
| Conservation sites identified: No                         |
| Occur in at least one PA: Yes                             |
| Area based regional management plan: Unknown              |
| Invasive species control or prevention: Unknown           |
| In-Place Species Management                               |
| Harvest management plan: No                               |
| Successfully reintroduced or introduced beningly: No      |
| Subject to ex-situ conservation: Unknown                  |
| In-Place Education  |
| Subject to recent education and awareness programmes: Yes |
| Included in international legislation: Yes                |

#### **Conservation Actions in Place**

Subject to any international management/trade controls: Yes

# **Conservation Actions Needed**

(http://www.iucnredlist.org/technical-documents/classification-schemes)

#### **Conservation Actions Needed**

2. Land/water management -> 2.1. Site/area management

## **Research Needed**

(http://www.iucnredlist.org/technical-documents/classification-schemes)

#### **Research Needed**

- 1. Research -> 1.2. Population size, distribution & trends
- 1. Research -> 1.3. Life history & ecology
- 1. Research -> 1.5. Threats
- 3. Monitoring -> 3.1. Population trends
- 3. Monitoring -> 3.2. Harvest level trends
- 3. Monitoring -> 3.3. Trade trends
- 3. Monitoring -> 3.4. Habitat trends

## Additional Data Fields

## Distribution

Continuing decline in area of occupancy (AOO): Unknown

Extreme fluctuations in area of occupancy (AOO): Unknown

Continuing decline in extent of occurrence (EOO): Unknown

Extreme fluctuations in extent of occurrence (EOO): Unknown

Continuing decline in number of locations: Unknown

Extreme fluctuations in the number of locations: Unknown

Lower depth limit (m): 120

Upper depth limit (m): 0

#### **Population**

Continuing decline of mature individuals: Yes

Extreme fluctuations: Unknown

**Population** 

Population severely fragmented: Unknown

Continuing decline in subpopulations: Unknown

Extreme fluctuations in subpopulations: Unknown

All individuals in one subpopulation: Unknown

**Habitats and Ecology** 

Continuing decline in area, extent and/or quality of habitat: Yes

Generation Length (years): 0.5-1.5

Movement patterns: Not a Migrant

Congregatory: Congregatory (and dispersive)

# The IUCN Red List Partnership



The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species<sup>™</sup> is produced and managed by the <u>IUCN Global Species</u>

<u>Programme</u>, the <u>IUCN Species Survival Commission</u> (SSC) and <u>The IUCN Red List Partnership</u>.

The IUCN Red List Partners are: <u>Arizona State University</u>; <u>BirdLife International</u>; <u>Botanic Gardens Conservation International</u>; <u>Conservation International</u>; <u>NatureServe</u>; <u>Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew</u>; <u>Sapienza University</u> of Rome; <u>Texas A&M University</u>; and <u>Zoological Society of London</u>.