

YZC Animal of the Month, September 2010

Brain Coral

Diploria sp.



It may look like a rock, but this large, round, boulder-like object on display in the museum foyer is the skeletal remains of an animal, or rather a colony of animals. Take a look at the maze-like pattern on its surface. In life, the grooves would have been home to lots of small animals called polyps, each with the same genetic make-up as its neighbour. These polyps laid down calcium carbonate from the minerals in the sea water around them to form the amazing structure you can see in the museum today.

The Brain Coral on display in the museum is from the warm seas of the West Indies. Light is important for the survival of these animals. Although the

polyps themselves do not use sunlight, the single-celled creatures called zooanthellae that provide the polyps with energy do. Like plants, zooanthellae photosynthesize – using the energy from sunlight to turn water and carbon dioxide into carbohydrates. This need for sunlight means that corals live in shallow seas that light can pass through.



Corals belong to the group of animals called the Cnidaria (pronounced with a silent C). Other cnidarians include jellyfish, Hydra, sea anemones, sea fans and sea pens. These animals, with their simple basic body plan of a stomach surrounded by two layers of cells with a single opening fringed with tentacles, are found very early in the fossil record – as long ago as 600 million years. But just because they are relatively simple does not mean that they are not important. Coral reefs are home to thousands of species, making them one of the most species-rich habitats outside tropical rainforests.