

YZC Animal of the Month, November 2012
Mushroom Coral
Fungia sp.



The entrance display of the Museum of Zoology contains some fabulous sea creatures, from sea fans to porcupine fish, spider crabs to sea turtles. Next to the Giant Clam is a beautiful display of coral skeletons. They may look like delicately carved chunks of rock, but corals are animals. Those in the entrance display are skeletons made by colonies of corals – each would have contained many individual coral animals (called polyps), each polyp in a colony possessing the same genes inside.

Venture inside the museum and near the top of the stairs to the lower gallery you can find a whole display case full of coral specimens. Here you can find specimens of a type of coral skeleton that is usually home to just a single coral polyp – a mushroom coral. You can see where this coral gets its name from. Just look at the underside of a mushroom next time you're in the kitchen and you can see delicate 'plates' radiating out from the middle. When it is young, a mushroom coral is attached to the sea floor by a stalk. As it gets older, this stalk dissolves and leaves just the disc-shaped coral you can see in the skeletons on display. Adult mushroom corals are not stuck to the ocean floor, and can be moved by waves. They can help a coral reef grow outwards, expanding onto slopes of softer sediments that other corals cannot inhabit.