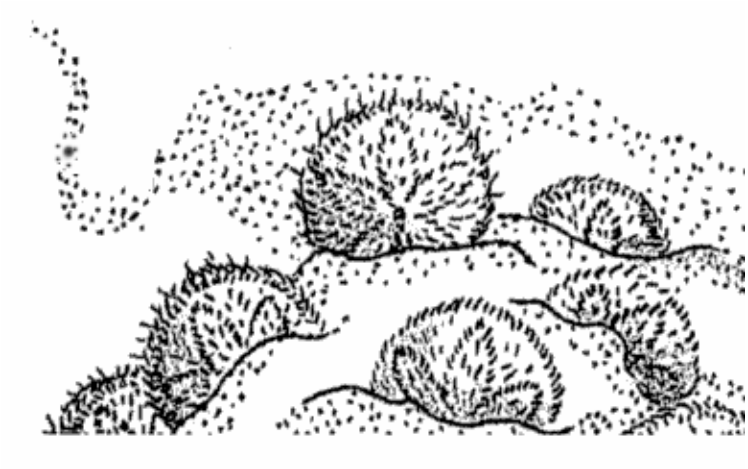
Sand Dollars



"It looks like a flower!"

Scientific name: *Dendraster excentricus*

Phylum: The Sand Dollar belongs to the phylum Echinodermata which means "spiny skins".

Size: The Sand Dollar is round, flat, and rather small, growing to about 8 centimeters (a little over 3 inches) in diameter.

Description: It ranges from gray to blackish-red, but usually looks dark purple. The many tiny spines and tube feet give the Sand Dollar a velvety look. White ones found on the beach are actually the tests (shell) of dead animals.

Habitat: The Sand Dollar likes rather clean sand and shallow water, especially in quiet bays and backwater areas.

Diet: It feeds on diatoms (tiny sea creatures) and detritus (the leavings of other creatures). Food is moved by tiny cilia (movable hairs) to the mouth, which is located near the middle of the underside of the shell.

Range: Our Sand Dollar, Dendraster excentricus, ranges from southeastern Alaska to northern Baja California.

Relatives: Its closest relative is the Sea Urchin, but you would never know it by looking at the living animals! The Sand Dollar is flat, with tiny spines on the top of the test (shell), while the Sea Urchin has a puffed up test, like a small balloon, the surface of which is covered with heavy, long spines.

Conservation Status: Because Sand Dollars like clean sand and shallow water, things that humans also like for shore development, they are threatened through destruction of habitat. Where they have good habitat, they are plentiful.

Predators: Sand Dollars are eaten by sea stars, snails, and skates.

Fun Facts:

- They can sometimes be seen in groups of thousands, not flat in the sand, but tilted up on their edge waiting for food items to come floating along on the current.
- A beautiful design, like an off-center flower with five petals, is on the top of the test.
- If you watch a Sand Dollar carefully, you can often see it "walking" along on its tiny tube feet. It even leaves a trail!
- There are many fossils of Sand Dollars – they have been around for millions of years.