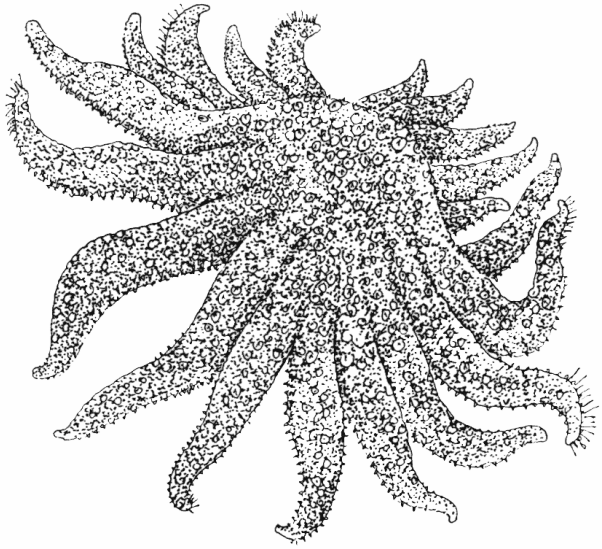
Sunflower Star



"I thought sea stars only had 5 legs!"

Scientific Name: *Pycnopodia helianthoides*

Phylum: Sunflower sea stars belong to the phylum Echinodermata or spiny-skinned animals.

Size: Most sea stars do only have 5 legs but Sunflower Stars can have up to 24 legs (or more properly rays). They can also reach a diameter of up to 24 inches (60 cm) across.

Color: Their color can range from purple, red, pink, brown, orange to yellow.

Habitat: Sunflower stars live on rocky shores and soft bottoms and can be found from the low-tide line to water over 1400 feet (430 m) deep.

Diet: A Sunflower star's favorite food is large clams, but it will also eat other bivalves, northern abalone, California sea cucumber, or just about anything it comes across. Once a sea star finds a clam it wraps its tube feet around the shell and pulls. It will pull until the bivalve tires and the shell opens even just a little. The star's stomach then extrudes into the shell and devoirs the clam meat.

Range: One of the largest and most active sea star on the Pacific Coast, Sunflower Stars range from Alaska to Southern California.

Relatives: Although they look very different Sea Stars are actually related to Sea Urchins, Sand dollars and Sea Cucumbers.

Conservation Status: Although not endangered, some people do try to kill sea stars to protect oyster and clam beds.

Fun Facts:

- A large Sunflower Star has more than 15,000 feet (called tube feet) that have to be coordinated in its stepping movements. The combined suction of these tube feet can exceed one hundred pounds, which makes them very good at opening clams!

- Sea stars have no brain or heart. Using special tube feet and organs at the tips of each ray, the Sunflower can both "smell" and sense between light and dark (but they can't see images).

- The sunflower sea star have little pincers (called Pedicellaria) all over their surface that keeps their body clean and if you place your forearm on the top side and then pull away you can feel them pull at your skin!