

Facebook and Instagram gave away the presence of the 'Japan pig' seahorse in Taiwan

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Japan pig seahorse (*Hippocampus japapigu*) in its natural habitat at Green Island, Taiwan. Credit: Jolly Huang

While monitoring of cryptic and elusive tiny creatures, such as pygmy

seahorses that measure only 13 to 27 mm, might be too costly and time-consuming for research teams and institutions, the underwater activity might be proving of particular interest to photography and diving enthusiasts.

At least, this is what comes across from the [recent reports](#) of five miniature species identified from Taiwanese waters by local citizen scientists and passed along via Facebook and Instagram. Amongst the findings, there are two species that had never before been reported from the country, including last year's media sensation: the "Japan pig," considered to only be found in the "Land of the Rising Sun." The study, conducted by the team of Mr. Joseph Heard, Drs Jeng-Ping Chen and Colin Wen from Tunghai University and Taiwan Ocean Research Institute, is published in *ZooKeys*, the very same open-access journal that saw the description of the species in 2018.

The scientists note that [pygmy](#) seahorses are largely unknown species and even basic information regarding their habitats is largely inconsistent and based on unofficial reports. As monitoring of marine wildlife can be expensive and time-consuming, especially regarding its small and cryptic representatives, the researchers decided to use "Phone a Friend" lifeline. Scuba divers and underwater photographers were approached on [social media](#) to help investigate pygmy seahorse diversity in Taiwan.



A Japan pig seahorse (*Hippocampus japapigu*) in its natural habitat at Hejie, Kenting, Taiwan. Credit: Chao-Tsung Chen

Their call resulted in 259 social media items, including 75 photos of 78 miniature creatures from their natural habitats at five different locations. Identified as five separate species, their discovery ranks Taiwan as one of the world's biodiversity hotspots for pygmy seahorse, given that there are only seven [species](#) of pygmy seahorses out there.

Four of those were found at Green Island alone, a small volcanic Pacific island, measuring only 15 km².

Pygmy seahorse specimen collection from Taiwan for future examination is still undergoing.

More information: Joseph Heard et al, Citizen science yields first records of *Hippocampus japapigu* and *Hippocampus denise* (Syngnathidae) from Taiwan: A hotspot for pygmy seahorse diversity, *ZooKeys* (2019). DOI: [10.3897/zookeys.883.39662](https://doi.org/10.3897/zookeys.883.39662)

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