



FACT SHEET

BACKGROUND ON WHALE SHARKS

What is a whale shark – fish or mammal?

A whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*) is a fish and 'breathes' via its gills. The name "whale shark" comes from the fact these animals are so large (as big as whales) and that they filter-feed (like large humpback whales). However, they have cartilage instead of bone – a true shark.

The whale shark is the largest living shark. With a broad, flattened head and minute teeth, it is one of the three filter-feeding species of shark. A whale shark can be identified by its distinctive patterning of light spots and stripes over a dark background, fading to a light colour on the underside. This natural camouflage allows it to 'blend' into its surroundings when viewed from any angle.

What is the history of the whale shark?

The whale shark is the largest living shark. It is the only member of the Rhincodontidae family. The species was first described in 1829 from a specimen caught off South Africa. As testimony to their rarity, until the mid-1980's, there had been only 320 documented sightings of whale sharks worldwide.

Are whale sharks a 'threatened' species?

In the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, the whale shark is listed as 'vulnerable to extinction'. For more information:

<http://www.iucnredlist.org/search/details.php/19488/all>

Where are whale sharks protected?

Whale sharks are protected in Australia, Honduras, India, the Maldives, Mexico, the Philippines, South Africa, Thailand and the USA. Taiwan, which had a major whale shark fishery, introduced a ban on whale shark hunting in 2007. Work continues to achieve protection in other countries that still permit the hunting of whale sharks.

How big do whale sharks grow?

It is believed that whale sharks can reach a length of 20m, with a specimen of this size reported from Taiwan in 2002. The main size encountered in ecotourism operations range from 5 – 8m. Male whale sharks reach maturity at around 8m.

For more information about whale shark life history: [Fishbase \(Whale shark\)](#)

Where do whale sharks breed?

The location of whale shark nurseries is unknown at present, although the only pregnant female that has ever been recorded was off the coast of Taiwan. There have been suggestions that these sharks may breed off the Galapagos Islands, the Philippines, and India.

How many 'pups' do whale sharks produce?

The whale shark produces more pups than any other species of shark – 300 young – as evidenced by a shark that was killed in the Taiwanese fishery in 1995. The size at birth was between 58 - 64cm. This catch provides the only count available in the scientific literature for the species.

Do whale sharks have teeth?

Whale sharks have about 3000 teeth in each jaw, but these are very small (less than 6mm in length) and not used for feeding.

What do whale sharks eat?

Whale sharks feed on very small prey (e.g. krill, jellyfish, small fish etc.) that they 'filter' from the water using the fine mesh of their gill-rakers. They must constantly feed, consuming large quantities of these small animals in order to survive. Whale sharks are often found in areas where large concentrations of this food can be found

Are whale sharks dangerous?

Whale sharks are filter-feeders and pose no immediate threat to humans. A rare danger may be if a swimmer were to get in the way of their very large (and powerful) tail.

How far can whale sharks travel?

One whale shark was tracked for over 13000km across the Pacific from Mexico to Tonga. Another shark was tracked from Ningaloo Marine Park to Indonesia. Many other long-distance travels have been documented: e.g. between the countries of Mexico, Belize, Honduras (Central America) and between Seychelles, Kenya and Thailand.

How deep can whale sharks swim?

Whale sharks have been recorded swimming to depths greater than 1500m, where the water temperature can be less than 4°C.

Where are whale sharks found?

Whale sharks have been recorded from more than 100 countries, mainly in the warm water belt north and south of the equator (~30°S and 30°N latitude).

Where can you swim with whale sharks?

Whale shark ecotourism (where it is possible to swim alongside these sharks) is expanding in many countries around the world. Ningaloo Marine Park, Western Australia was one of the first locations to offer this activity on a commercial scale – and still continues every year between April and June. Whale sharks are known to visit many countries - although the numbers seen in most are very low.