

LEVELED BOOK • R

Whale Sharks: Giant Fish



Written by Louanne Silver

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Focus Question

What are some of the whale shark's traits that help it survive in the ocean?



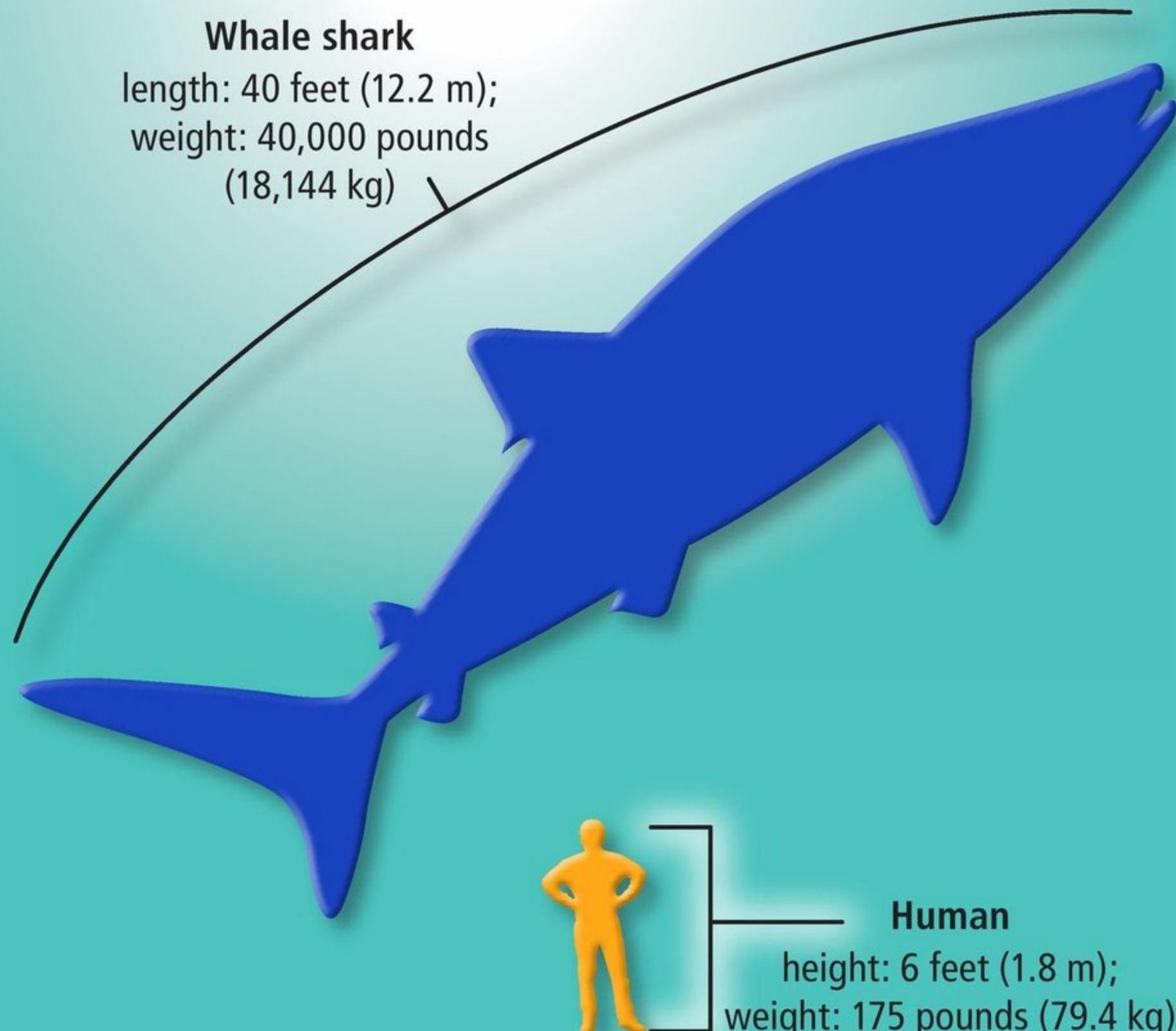
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The Biggest Fish in the Sea

When people think about sharks, images of sharp teeth and blood often come to mind. Have no fear! The biggest shark in the world—also the biggest fish—is a gentle giant. The whale shark is so peaceful that people can safely swim beside it. This harmless creature gets its name because, like a whale, it's big—really big.

How Big Is It?



Watch Your Mouth!

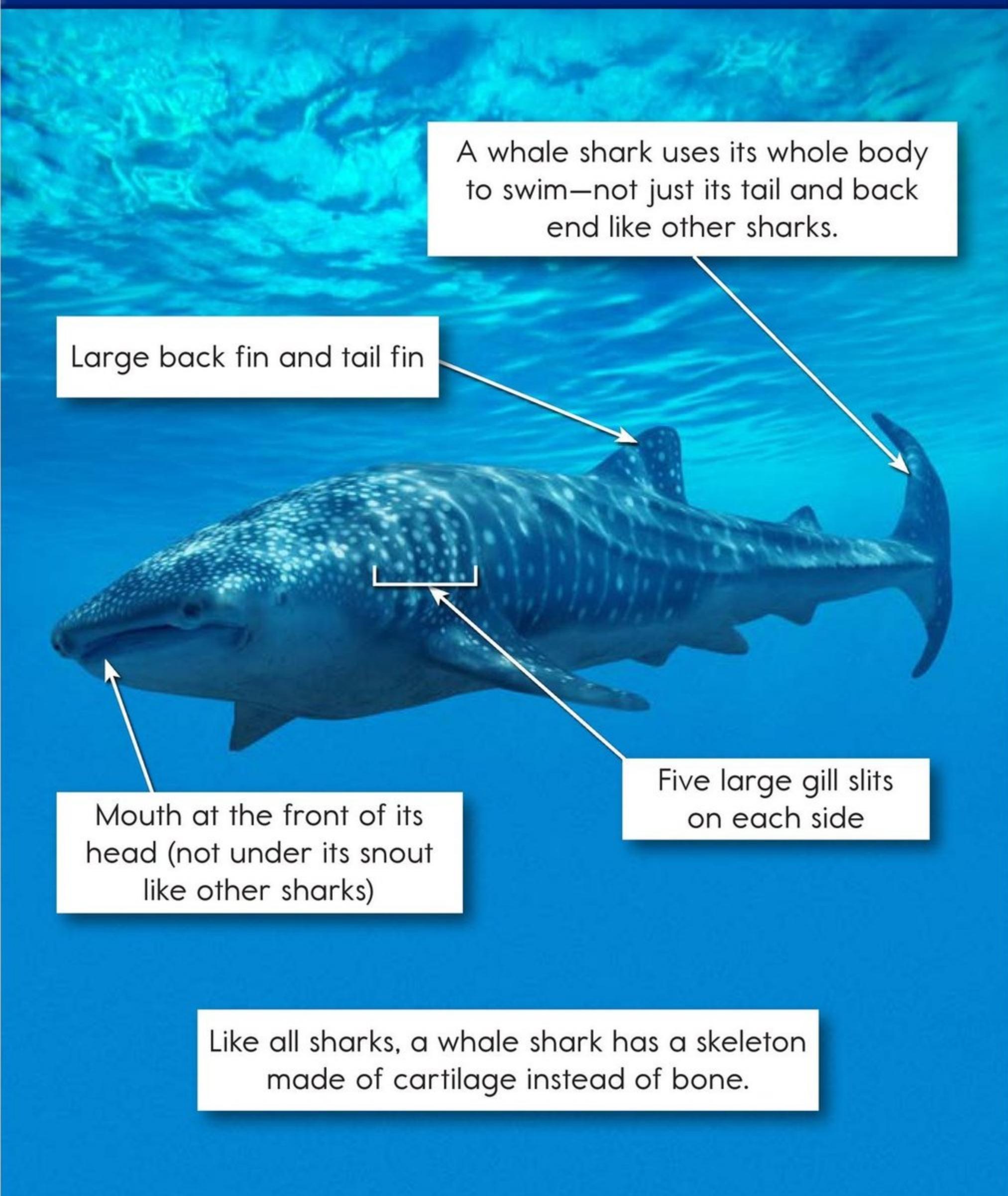
Whale sharks have a wide, flat head and a blunt **snout** with a huge mouth. They often swim with their mouth open.

Like other sharks, whale sharks have rough skin and sharp **scales**. Their back is dark—bluish, grayish, or brownish—with a pattern of cream-colored spots and stripes. People often describe the pattern as similar to a checkerboard or domino. Scientists don't know the purpose of this unusual color pattern. It could be for **camouflage**, but adults are so large that they don't really need protection from **predators**. The color pattern may help keep young whale sharks safe. It may also help shield whale sharks from too much sunlight at the water's surface.



A whale shark is easily recognized by its huge mouth and the pattern on its back.

What Makes a Whale Shark a Fish?



Most fish

- have a backbone
- breathe with gills
- live in water
- have tails and paired fins
- are cold-blooded
- have scales
- lay eggs

On the Go

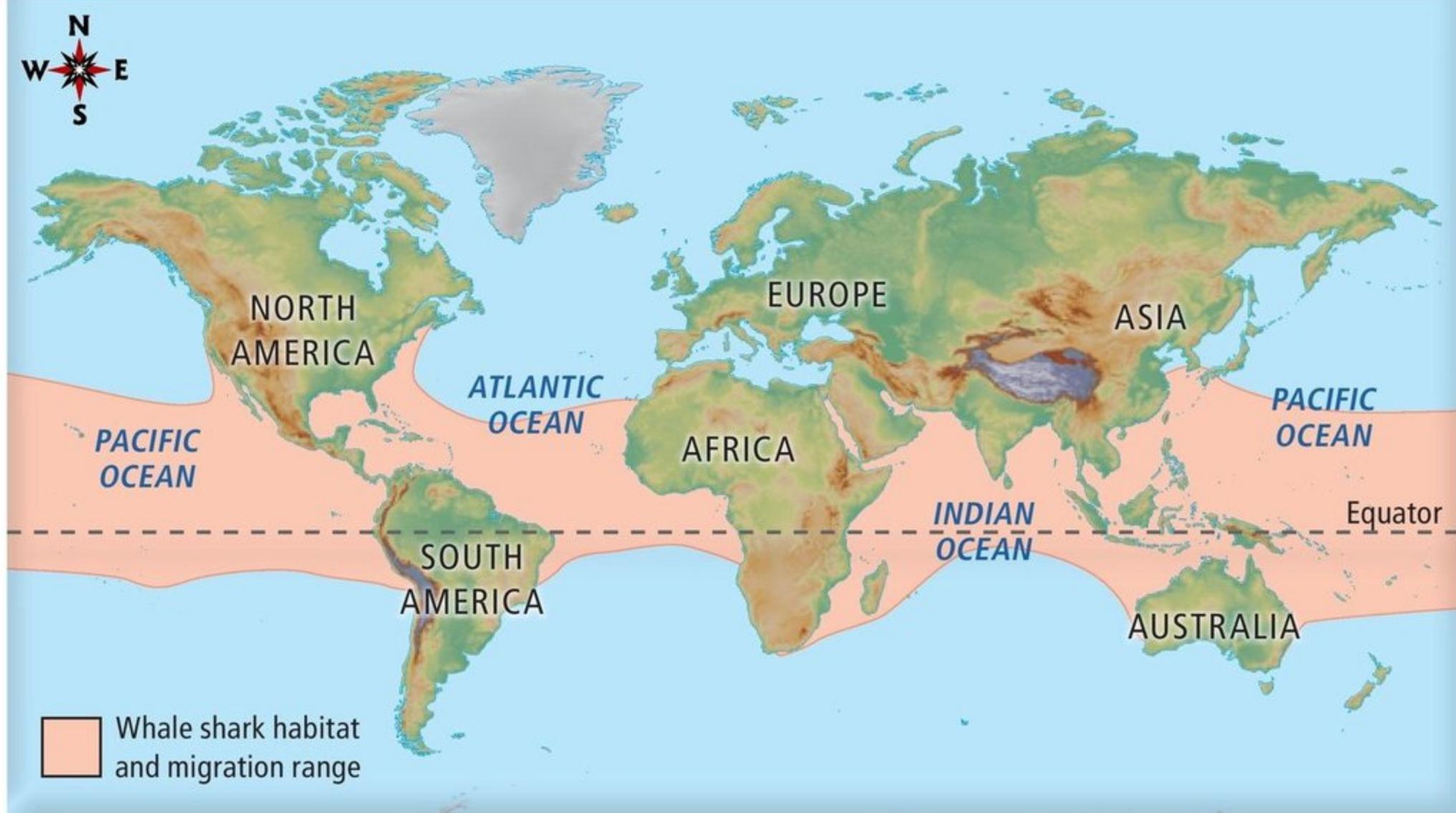
Whale sharks live in warmer parts of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. They swim in the open ocean as well as close to shore. These giants are often seen swimming at the surface, and they're also known to dive deep. They can dive as deep as 6,000 feet (1,829 m) below the water's surface.

Whale sharks do not usually travel with other whale sharks, but other types of fish may keep them company. They may travel with groups of large fish that have similar feeding **habits**. Whale sharks are also seen with remoras, a type of fish with suckers. Remoras attach themselves to whale sharks and eat **parasites** off their skin.



Remoras eat parasites found on whale sharks and get protection in return.

Where Whale Sharks Live



Whale sharks **migrate** long distances.

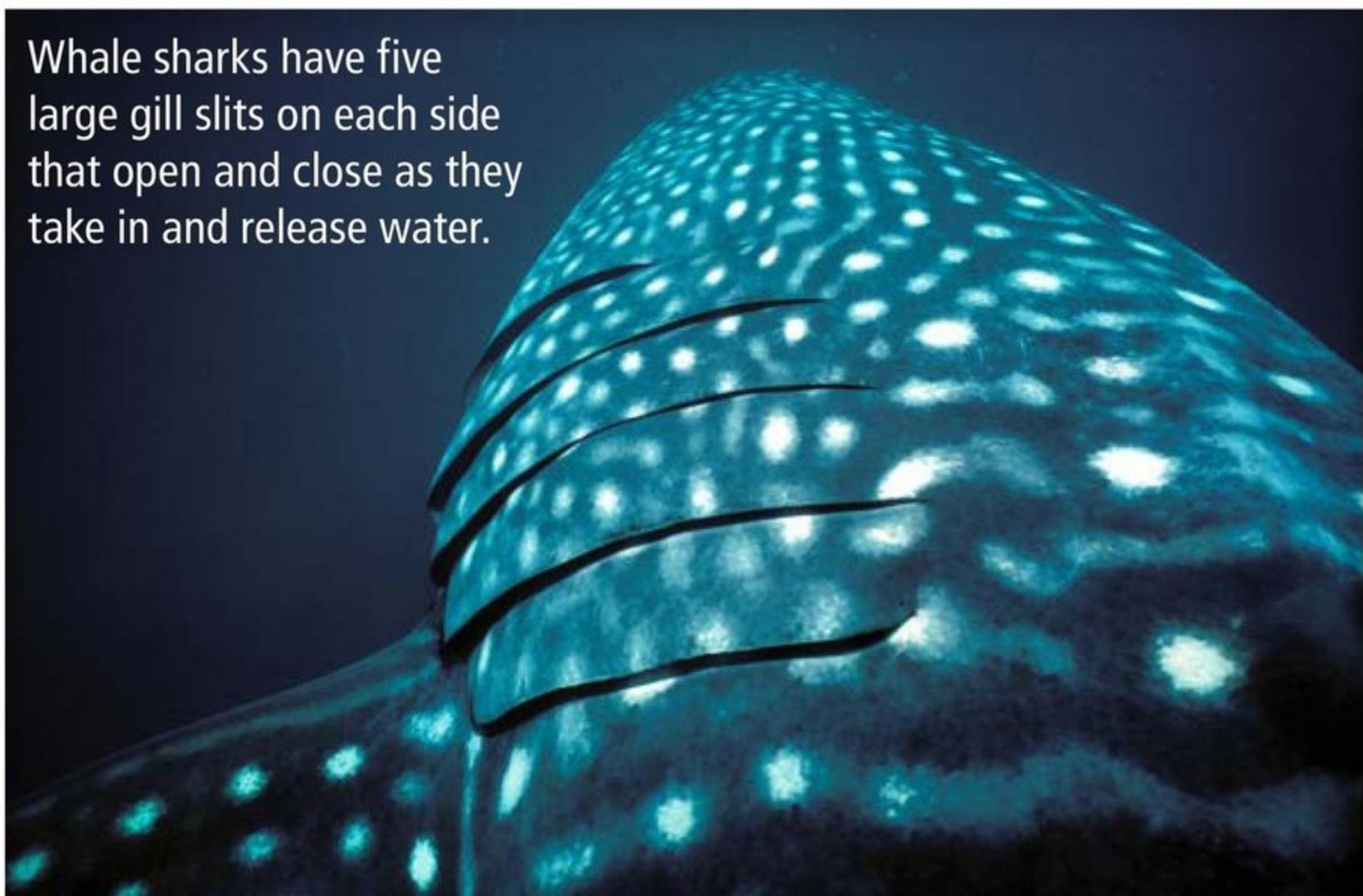
They commonly swim more than 1,240 miles (2,000 km). One whale shark was recorded migrating 8,077 miles (13,000 km) over a period of more than three years. Scientists don't know why whale sharks migrate such long distances. It could be related to breeding, finding food, or other reasons.

Whale sharks have gathering places around the world. The largest, called the *Afuera* (Spanish for “out” or “outside”), is located off the coast of Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula. Over four hundred whale sharks have been observed there at the same time, feeding on large quantities of fish eggs.

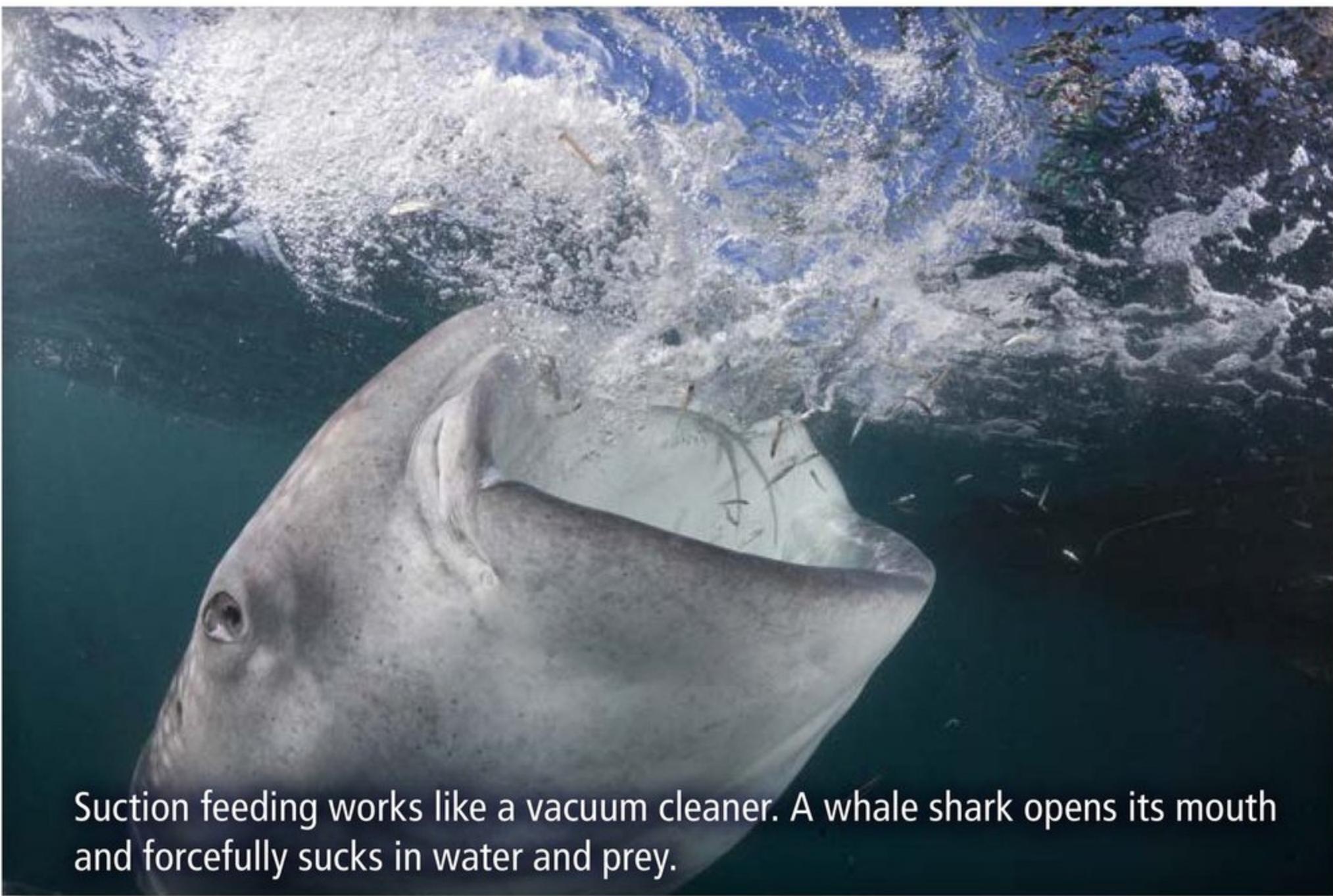
Big Fish, Small Food

Unlike most other sharks, whale sharks don't actively hunt for food and are not considered predators. They eat tiny ocean animals that drift or swim in the water. Krill, which are similar to shrimp, are among their favorite foods. They may also eat small fish, squid, plants, fish eggs, and occasionally larger fish.

Whale sharks have five large gill slits on each side that open and close as they take in and release water.



Whale sharks use a process called *filter feeding* to collect food. When they open their mouth, their food flows in with the water. As the water flows toward their gills, filter pads catch the small animals and plants. Then the water flows out through their gill slits.



Suction feeding works like a vacuum cleaner. A whale shark opens its mouth and forcefully sucks in water and prey.

Whale sharks use two types of filter feeding. Both types can be done in either a horizontal or vertical position. **Suction** feeding involves sucking or gulping in large amounts of water. This type of feeding is useful when large amounts of food are present. Whale sharks sometimes cough to clear out excess food that builds up on their filter pads.

Passive feeding involves swimming with their mouth open and their head bobbing from side to side. With passive feeding, whale sharks swallow anything that flows in, including ocean trash. They turn their stomach inside out through their mouth to get rid of the trash.



A whale shark has 300 rows of tiny teeth, but it doesn't use them for eating.

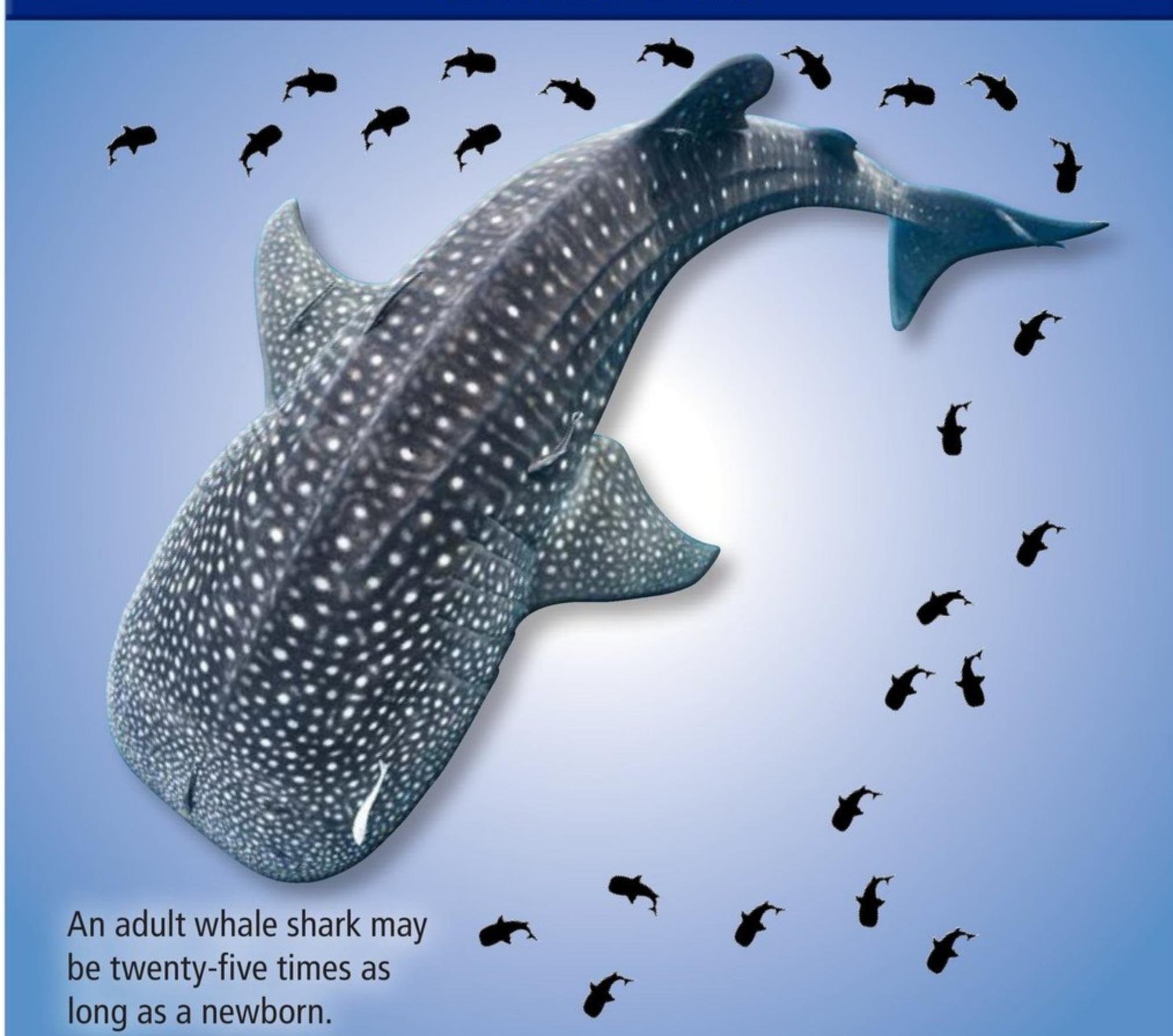
Whale sharks probably find their food by smell. Scientists figured this out by looking at the location of a whale shark's nostrils and eyes. The nostrils are located near the top of their mouth, close to a whale shark's food source. The eyes are farther back on their head, which suggests a less important role in finding food.

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- A whale shark's open mouth can measure 5 feet (1.5 m) wide—large enough to fit a person!
- The largest whale shark ever measured was 66 feet (20 m) long—as long as one and a half school buses.
- A whale shark can filter an amount of water equal to what an Olympic-sized swimming pool can hold (650,000 gallons, or 2,460,517 liters) in four hours.



Babies and Adults



An adult whale shark may be twenty-five times as long as a newborn.

Baby Giants

Scientists used to think that whale sharks laid eggs. Then, in 1995, they discovered that whale sharks give birth to live babies. A pregnant female that died had more than three hundred babies, or pups, growing inside her. The growing sharks were 16 to 24 inches (42–63 cm) long. Some were more developed than others, so they would have been born sooner.



Two snorkelers swim alongside a juvenile whale shark in the Sea of Cortez.

Except for their smaller size, pups look like adult whale sharks. Not much is known about whale shark births because no one has ever observed one. Scientists think that whale sharks give birth in the open ocean rather than near shore.

Young whale sharks become adults at around thirty years of age. No one knows how long they live, but sharks as a group have long lives. Because of their large size, scientists think that whale sharks could live for one hundred years.

Care for a Swim?

Swimming with whale sharks is popular in the places where these huge creatures gather. More than twelve thousand people swim or dive with whale sharks each year. Tour companies have rules for keeping both the whale sharks and the people safe.



Guidelines for diving with whale sharks include not touching or disturbing them.

One woman who swam with whale sharks said that her first sight of them took her breath away. She described swimming with these giants as an experience of a lifetime. She said, “There is no reason to fear these gentle creatures and every reason to see them up close!”

Gentle Giants

You might expect the biggest fish on the planet—a shark—to be a frightening creature, but the whale shark is nothing of the sort. This huge animal is peaceful and slow moving. It's a symbol of good luck in parts of Asia. On an island off the coast of Africa, its name means “many stars.” In Vietnam, it’s called “Sir Fish” and is believed to offer protection. People who study or swim with whale sharks confirm that these enormous fish truly are gentle giants.



Whale sharks move slowly, traveling approximately 3 miles per hour (5 kmph).

Glossary

camouflage (<i>n.</i>)	the colors, patterns, or shapes of an animal's body that allow it to blend into the background or hide (p. 5)
habits (<i>n.</i>)	regular behaviors (p. 7)
migrate (<i>v.</i>)	to move from one habitat or region to another at a certain time each year (p. 8)
parasites (<i>n.</i>)	plants or animals that grow on or feed off another (p. 7)
passive (<i>adj.</i>)	not active (p. 10)
predators (<i>n.</i>)	animals that hunt and eat other animals to survive (p. 5)
scales (<i>n.</i>)	thin, flat plates that cover many fish and reptiles (p. 5)
snout (<i>n.</i>)	the nose and mouth of an animal (p. 5)
suction (<i>n.</i>)	a sucking force that can draw something into a space or cause it to stick to a surface (p. 10)

Words to Know

camouflage
habits
migrate
parasites
passive

predators
scales
snout
suction

Front and back cover: An enormous whale shark glides through the water near Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula.

Title page: A whale shark's open mouth can measure up to 5 feet (1.5 m) wide.

Page 3: A whale shark hovers close to the water's surface near Papua New Guinea.

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