

Whale Sharks – Rhincodon Typus

What are they?

Rhincodon typus, the whale shark, is in fact a shark and not a whale but not to worry! These gentle giants might be the biggest fish in the sea but they are filter feeders and spend their days cruising the oceans in search of one of the tiniest organisms, plankton.

What do they look like?

Whale Sharks can be identified by their distinct pattern of white stripes and spots against a dark blue grey body. These checkerboards of spots and stripes are unique to each whale shark and assists researchers to count populations. Whale sharks also have 3 prominent ridges along their streamlined body with eyes at the front of their broad flat head and very large mouth. An interesting fact about these docile creatures is they have the toughest and thickest skin on their back than any other animal in the world!

Biology

Whale sharks can reach lengths of up to 18 metres. The whale sharks that visit Ningaloo are more commonly between 3 to 12 metres. Needless to say a 12 metre shark can weigh as much as 11 tonnes with a mouth up to a metre wide!

Very little is known about these mysterious creatures, despite their large size. Whale sharks tend to be solitary travelling large distances and are often sporadic in their appearances. Their annual visit to Ningaloo Reef is one of only a few places in the world where large numbers congregate regularly close to shore accessible to observers.

It is estimated that a whale shark's life span is over 100 years, reaching maturity at approximately 30 years and sexual maturity at 8-9 metres in both sexes.

Whale Sharks are ovoviviparous meaning they give birth to live young measuring approximately 40 - 60cm. Female's can carry up to 300 embryos and have the ability to store sperm for later fertilisation. It is unknown how often whale sharks reproduce or where they go to mate and give birth.

Threats

Because so little is known about whale sharks and their population is uncertain, whale sharks are considered a vulnerable species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Whale sharks are protected in Australian waters under both state and federal legislation. (Wildlife Conservation Act 1950, Conservation and Land Management Act 1984 and Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999). This means it is an offence to fish, harm or disturb whale sharks in any way.

The major threats affecting whale sharks today is hunting, boat strike and unsustainable tourism. Any natural predators are unknown.

Although whale sharks are considered vulnerable by the ICUN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), in some parts of the world they are still being hunted for their meat, known as 'tofu fish' and fins for soup.

As whale sharks spend a lot of their time feeding at the surface of the water, boat-strikes are becoming increasingly common and a significant issue in the north-west of Australia where boat activities are popular.

However, the unique opportunity of swimming with these gentle giants has resulted in the development of a popular, seasonal ecotourism industry in Western Australia managed closely by the Department of Environment and Conservation.

You too can play a part in Whale Shark conservation by...

- Joining a Ningaloo whale shark snorkel eco-tour where fees go towards conservation and research for whale sharks
- Refuse to buy or eat any whale shark products
- Abide the Code of Conduct when observing whale sharks (see below for more information)
- Submit your whale shark photo's to ECOCEAN photo identification library and help researchers gain more information on whale shark populations and movements (see below for more information)
- Adopt a whale shark from www.whaleshark.org

Swimming with whale sharks

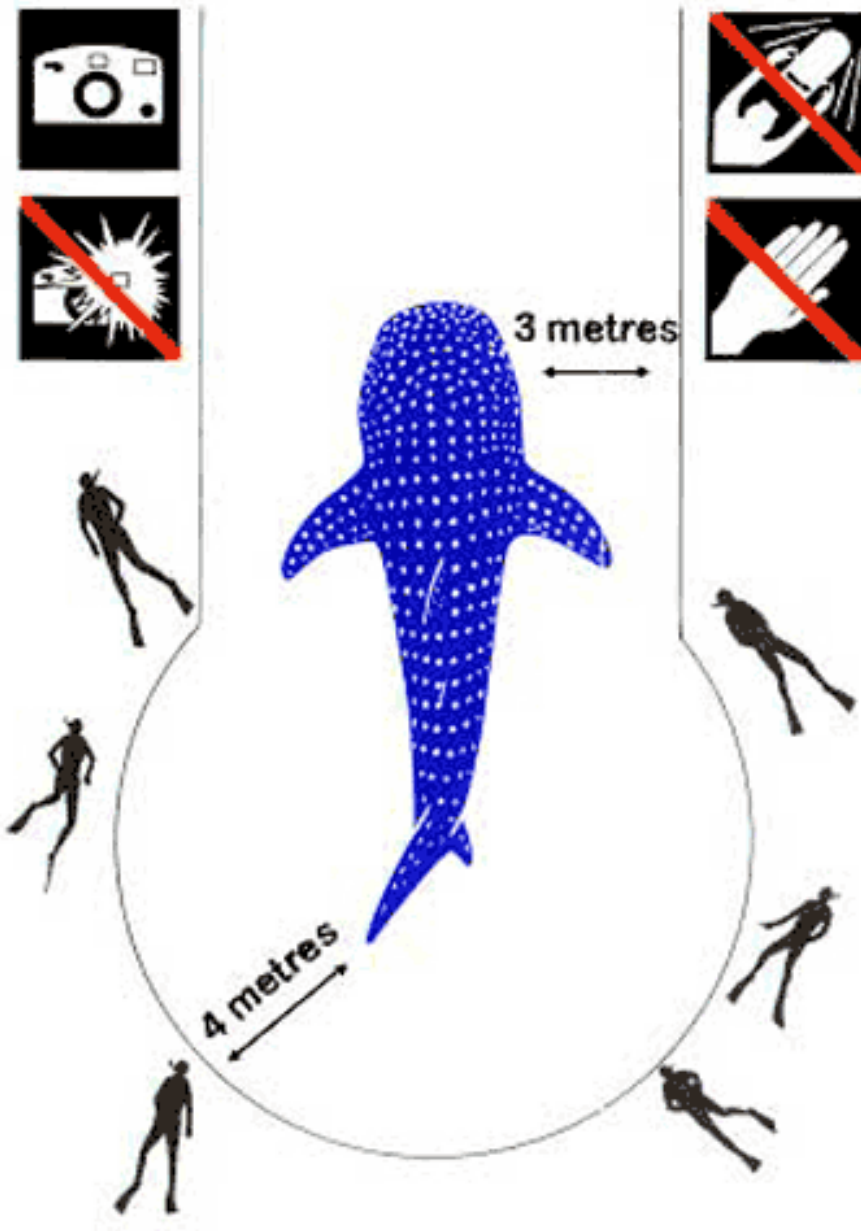
Snorkelling with a whale shark on Ningaloo Reef is an amazing and unique experience. With increasing numbers of tourists visiting the area for the annual aggregation, the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) is responsible for protecting and managing whale sharks in Western Australian waters and responsible for the day-to-day management of whale sharks in Commonwealth waters.

Only operators licenced by DEC are permitted to conduct commercial whale shark interaction eco-tours.

To ensure the safety of the whale sharks, strict guidelines have been put in place for both swimmers and boats (both private and commercial).

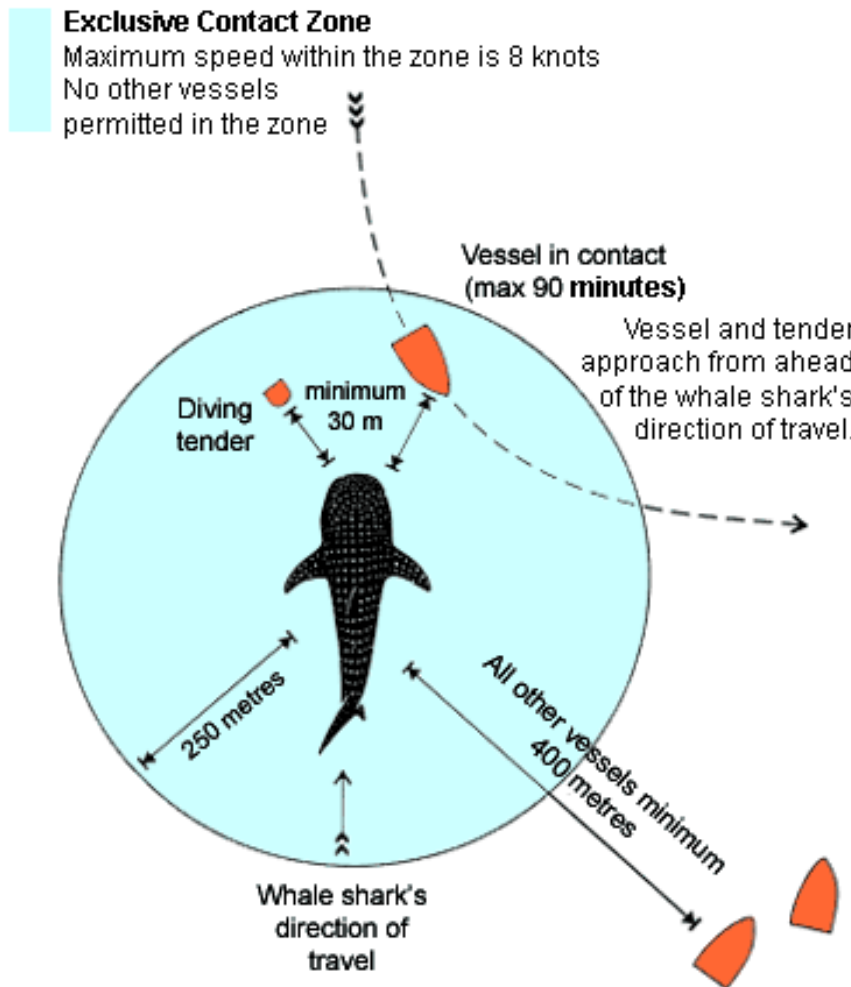
Code of Conduct

Although these gentle giants pose no threat to humans, these are wild animals and can inflict serious injury should someone be struck by a flick of their tail. The codes of conduct are put in place to prevent disturbance or harm towards the whale sharks in anyway.



Swimmers in the Contact Zone must not:

- ✘ Attempt to touch or ride on a whale shark
- ✘ Restrict the normal movement or behaviour of the shark
- ✘ Approach closer than 3 metres from the head or body and 4 metres from the tail
 - ✘ Use flash photography
 - ✘ Use motorised propulsion aids
- ✘ Exceed more than 10 people in the water at any one time



Exclusive Contact Zone

- ☑ An exclusive contact zone of a 250 metres radius applies around any whale shark.
- ☑ Only one vessel at a time may operate within the zone for a maximum of 90 minutes and at a speed of 8 knots or less.
- ☑ The first vessel within that zone is considered to be 'in contact'.
- ☑ A second vessel to arrive must keep a distance of 250 metres from the shark.
- ☑ Any other vessels must be 400 metres from the shark.

Vessel Operators in the Contact Zone:

- Must not approach closer than 30 metres to a shark
- Should approach from ahead of the shark's direction of travel when dropping swimmers into the water
- Must display both whale shark (commercial vessels only) and dive flags when swimmers are in the water.

Research

In order to provide better protection for whale sharks it is important we continue to grow our understanding of whale shark biology, movement patterns and population.

Whale sharks are characterised by their pattern of spots and stripes and are unique to each shark. This pattern along with size, sex and scar marks can be used to identify individual whale sharks.

The ECOCEAN photo identification library has been established to collect, store and match photos to document the number of individual whale sharks that visit Ningaloo Marine Park each season, those that return over many years and where they travel after Ningaloo.

The Library can use photographs of the skin patterning directly behind the gills of each shark to distinguish between individual animals.



You too can assist with whale shark research by submitting photos and relevant sighting information to the online library at www.whaleshark.org. The information you submit will be used in mark-recapture studies to help with the global conservation of this threatened species.



Contact us by calling **9949 1994** / **Freecall 1800 138 501** or by dropping into our booking office which is located at Ningaloo Caravan & Holiday Resort on Murat Road, the main road into Exmouth. You'll find us directly opposite Exmouth Visitor Centre and next door to Pinocchio Italian Restaurant.