



SHARK STEWARDS

RESTORING OCEAN HEALTH BY SAVING SHARKS

WHALE SHARK

(*Rhincodon typus*)

Order – Orectolobiformes
Family – Rhincodontidae
Genus – *Rhincodon*
Species – *typus*

These sharks are recognizable not just for being the largest fish in the sea, but also for their unique patterns. They are filter feeders, often swimming near the surface of the open sea; they gulp in water and filter everything from plankton and fish eggs to crustaceans and schooling fish, to occasional larger prey like squid or tuna. Despite their size, they are considered harmless to humans, and will often interact docilely with divers.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT

The whale shark has a very widespread distribution, occurring in all tropical and warm temperate seas, except in the Mediterranean. It occurs throughout the Atlantic Ocean, from New York through the Caribbean to central Brazil and from Senegal to the Gulf of Guinea.



Image CITES

It also occurs in the Indian Ocean, throughout the region, including the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf. In the Pacific Ocean, it is found from Japan to Australia, off Hawaii, and from California to Chile.

DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS

1. Back and sides marked with unique checkerboard pattern of light spots and transverse bars
2. Head is broad and flat with a short snout
3. Mouth is near the tip of the snout
4. Sides have three prominent ridges

BIOLOGY

→ Distinctive Features

A streamlined body and a depressed, broad, and flattened head characterize the whale shark. The whale shark has a unique “checkerboard” color pattern of light spots and stripes on a dark background.

→ Coloration

Whale sharks are grayish, bluish or brownish above, with an upper surface pattern of creamy white spots between pale, vertical and horizontal stripes. The belly is white. The function of the distinctive pattern of body mark is unknown.

FUN FACT

Whale sharks have smaller livers than most sharks and may control their buoyancy by swallowing gulps of air. g

→ Size and Age

The whale shark is the largest living fish with the maximum size thought to be about 20m. Age estimates for whale sharks are as high as 60 years but no one really knows how long this species lives.

→ Food Habits

Whale sharks feed on a wide variety of planktonic (microscopic) and nektonic (larger free-swimming) prey, such as small crustaceans, schooling fishes, and occasionally on tuna and squids.

→ Reproduction

The species is a live bearer, with an ovoviviparous (egg cases hatching in the mother's uteri, with the female giving birth to live young) mode of development.

→ Predators

Whale shark specimens have been found in the gut of a blue shark and a blue marlin. At Ningaloo Reef, great white sharks and tiger sharks have been reported to attack whale sharks when they congregate.

FUN FACT

Individuals have been observed coughing, a mechanism that is thought to be employed to clear or flush the gill rakers of accumulated food particles

DANGER TO HUMANS

Generally considered harmless. However, there have been a few cases of whale sharks ramming sportfishing boats, possibly after being provoked. Usually, the sharks are more at risk of being struck accidentally by vessels whilst basking or feeding on the surface.

CONSERVATION

Threats to this species include bycatch, fisheries for fins, oil and meat, vessel strikes, and habitat loss. The fins are used as decoration. Listed as "Endangered" under the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), these sharks are listed under Appendix II of the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES). The whale shark population has declined over 50% in the last 50 years and the global population is declining. Yet areas of tourism may provide regional protection for this species.

Shark Stewards is working to increase international protection for this species.