



CITES 2002

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WWF FACTSHEET

12th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES Santiago, 3-15 November 2002

Whale Shark

Rhincodon typus

I. Species Facts

History and distribution

The whale shark is the biggest fish in the world, and can grow up to 20 metres long and weigh up to 34 tonnes. They are found worldwide in warm temperate and tropical seas with the exception of the Mediterranean. A highly migratory species, they cross thousands of kilometres to different feeding grounds in many different countries, often returning to favoured coastal areas for a few months of the year when the zooplankton they feed on is abundant. At these times they can be seen in groups of up to the low hundreds.

The whale shark can neither bite nor chew. Although its mouth can stretch to four feet wide, its thousands of teeth are so tiny that it can only eat small shrimps, fish and plankton by using its modified gill rakers as a suction filter.

It is estimated that whale sharks reach sexual maturity at an age range of 9 to 30 years. The gestation period and interval between births is unknown but females have been found to produce as many as 300 embryos in her uterus, although it is thought that less than 10% of the young survive to adulthood. Upon giving birth, the mother sharks leave her young to fend for themselves.

Threats to whale sharks

The main threat to whale sharks is the growth of unregulated and unsustainable fisheries to supply international trade demands for shark fins, liver oil (used to waterproof wooden boats), skin and meat in East Asian countries. The whale shark is very vulnerable to capture because of its coastal habitat, feeding behaviour and docility. This increasing demand for whale shark meat, skin, and fins in international trade has put this shark under threat. Research over recent decades in China, the Philippines, the Maldives, Taiwan and India indicates population decreases that appear to be linked to local over-exploitation.

Other threats come from by-catch in set nets, accidental collision with boats, and coastal pollution due to this species occurrence in coastal waters. Eco-tourism is also rapidly on the increase, and while this can lead to great benefits such as revenue generation and employment, if left unregulated it could lead to disturbance of feeding patterns of the shark. Management guidelines have been set up some places, such as Australia and the Philippines, to protect against boats and swimmers, including limiting contact time, numbers and approach distances.

The range of the whale shark comprises some 124 countries, most of which have no management measures in place. Only a few have declared protection for the whale shark, including Australia, Honduras, India, Maldives, Philippines, South Africa, Thailand and the US. A marine sanctuary was set up in Belize in 2000 and one is currently under consideration in Mexico. Taiwan has implemented a scheme to monitor international trade in seven whale shark products. In the Philippines, where fishing for this species was prohibited in 1998, poaching still persists.

II. Whale sharks and CITES

Current status within CITES

The whale shark is currently not listed on the CITES Appendices.

Proposals to the 12th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES

India and the Philippines have submitted proposal to the 12th CITES Conference of the Parties calling for whale sharks to be included on Appendix II.

III. WWF Projects

In the Philippines, WWF is working on two projects related to whale sharks. One is an eco-tourism development project that aims to promote and manage the interaction between whale sharks and tourists. In the other, WWF is collaborating with other organisations in the development of conservation management programmes for a number of species, including whale sharks.

In 1999, WWF led the conservation community's successful effort to establish a global plan of action for shark conservation at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation – the International Plan of Action on Sharks (IPOA – Sharks). During the coming years WWF will continue to work to secure effective implementation of the IPOA. This will be achieved by reporting on overall adherence to the plan's objectives by states and regional fishing organisations, and by intervening in selected, key shark fisheries in the Pacific.

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For more information: www.panda.org/species



WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by:

- conserving the world's biological diversity
- ensuring that the use of renewable resources is sustainable
- promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

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