

# ECOCEAN

*'Best Practice'*

## ***Whale Shark Ecotourism Manual***



[www.whaleshark.org](http://www.whaleshark.org)



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### Acknowledgements

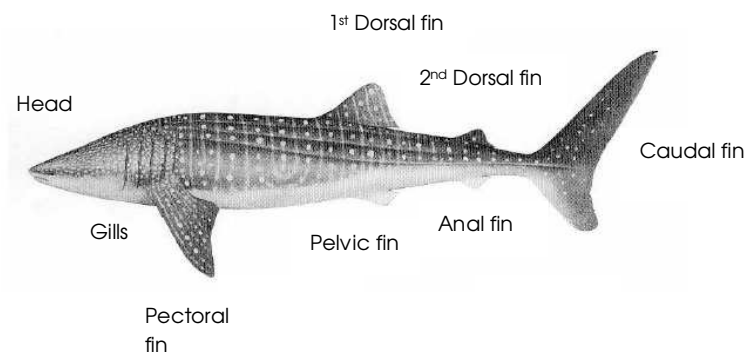
The 'Best Practice' Whale Shark Ecotourism Guidelines are adapted from those developed by the WA Department of Conservation and Land Management and the ecotourism industry from Ningaloo Marine Park, Western Australia.

This Manual has been produced with the support of UNEP Regional Seas Programme

## ***Before a whale shark interaction: Educate ecotourists about whale shark biology / ecology, conservation / threats***

### Whale shark biology / ecology

Whale sharks are a true shark, with cartilage for skeleton and denticles instead of scales. They are called 'whale' shark because they are so large (as big as a whale) and feed like baleen whales (on very small prey). They do not come to the surface to breathe air as true whales do – rather they obtain oxygen from the water via their gills.



Whale sharks are found in all tropical and warm temperate seas with a range typically between latitudes 30°N and 35°S. They are known to inhabit both deep and shallow coastal waters and the lagoons of coral atolls and reefs. They have internal fertilization and produce live young.

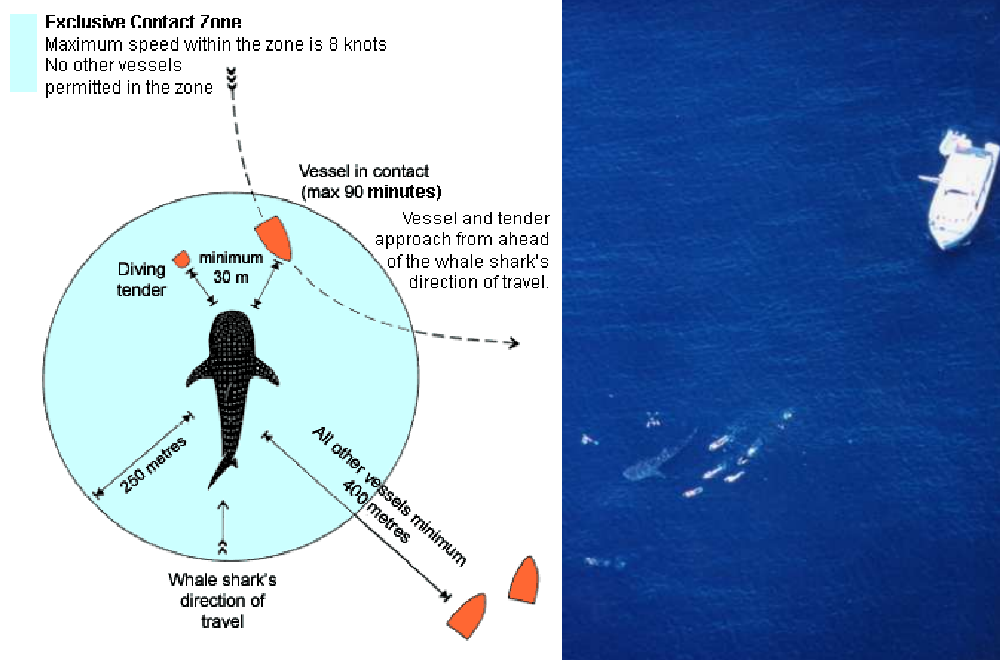
### Conservation / threats

The whale shark is currently classed as 'vulnerable to extinction' in the World Conservation Union's (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species. Despite this, they are protected under law in the waters of only about 10 percent of countries the species is known to visit. The most significant threat to the whale shark is human activity – in particular hunting. The whale shark's habit of swimming at the surface makes the animal susceptible to fishing pressure but also to boat-strike and almost certainly to plastic ingestion, known to be deadly to many marine species.

**Ecotourism can benefit this species – but it can also be a threat unless it is well managed with participants following minimal impact guidelines (see below).**

## ***Industry: How a vessel should approach a whale shark safely and with minimal impact***

### Industry operations

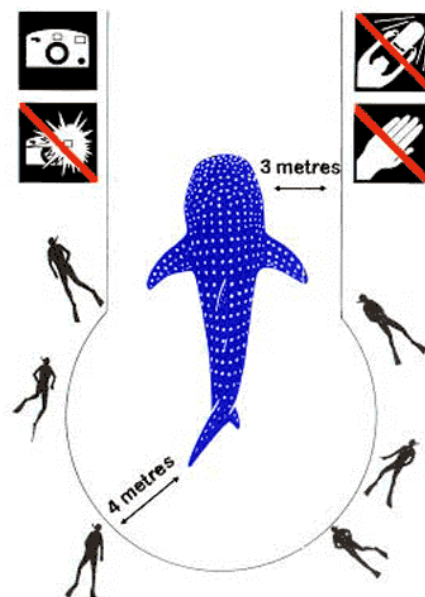


- 1) Maximum number of swimmers in the water interacting with a whale shark – 10 or less
- 2) A 'safety' staff member should be present in the water with snorkellers at all times
- 3) Boat should approach the whale shark and drop people well ahead of the oncoming shark
- 4) Boat should remain a minimum of 30m from the sharks at all times
- 5) All other vessels should remain 400m from the vessel 'in contact'
- 6) Maximum speed of the vessel within the 200m 'contact zone' should be 8 knots
- 7) Maximum time of interaction should be 90 minutes

## ***Ecotourists: How to approach a whale shark in the water***

In order to disturb the sharks as little as possible while you are in the water, keep in mind the following:

- 1) Enter the water gently and swim quickly (with a minimum of splashing) towards the animal
- 2) Be sure have your head in the water, but looking forward (not down). Invariably, the whale shark will be swimming within 1-2m of the surface so scan in front.
- 3) When you enter the water and spot the shark (which will more often be approaching you straight on) swim out to the side, taking a position to the side and behind the pectoral fin.
- 4) Do not restrict the movement or behaviour of the shark.
- 5) Swim alongside the shark, being sure to provide sufficient room for your fellow ecotourists to also see the shark.
- 6) Do not attempt to touch or ride the whale shark
- 7) Remain at least 4m from the tail of the shark; and 3-4m from the head



## ***Ecotourists: How to interact with a whale shark and cause minimal impact***

In order to disturb the sharks as little as possible while you are in the water, keep in mind the following:

- 8) Do not 'duck-dive' near or in front of the shark's head (a 'banking' behaviour often results and is a sign of discomfort (see below))



- 9) Do not use SCUBA equipment under or near the head of the shark as these animals often show a reaction (see below)



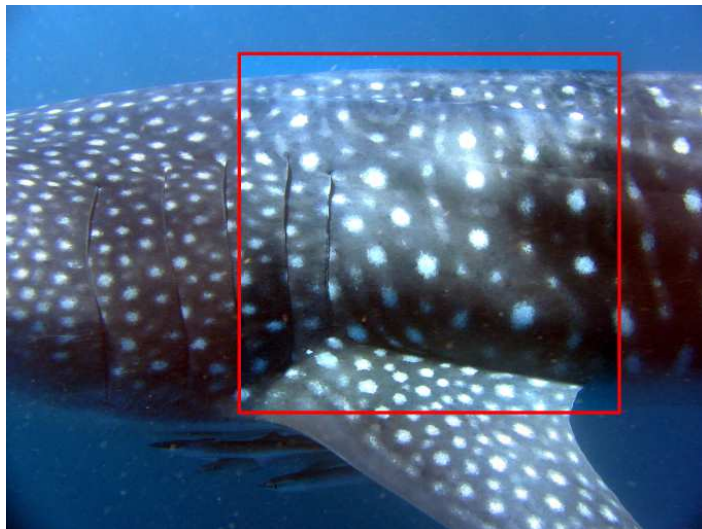
- 10) Do not use scooters and / or flash photography during an interaction
- 11) Watch out for the safety of your fellow ecotourists
- 12) Always check regularly for direction / instruction from tour industry personnel / boat skipper etc.



## ***Ecotourists: How to help data collection and monitoring of the species***

For each whale shark / ecotourist interaction, the following data is important to record where possible:

- Date
- Time
- Location (GPS if possible)
- Shark sex
- Shark size (estimate)
- Your name and email (for updates)
- Identification photographs



**This information should then be uploaded to the ECOCEAN  
Whale Shark Photo-identification Library at:**

**<http://www.whaleshark.org/submit.jsp?langCode=en>**