

Whale sharks

St Helena

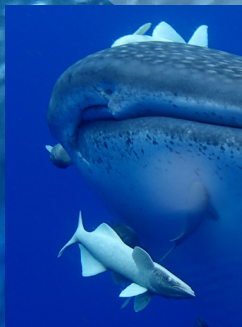
Rules for interacting with whale sharks

- Deliberately touching or riding whale sharks is strictly prohibited
- No flash photography
- All persons are to remain a minimum of 3m swimming distance away from the whale sharks, and a minimum of 4m away from the whale shark tail
- A total interaction time of 45 minutes is permitted with an individual/ aggregation of whale sharks
- At any one time only 8 snorkelers are permitted in the water with one whale shark/aggregation of whale sharks
- Only locally accredited tour operators and local recreational boat owners who have received a briefing can interact with whale sharks

Hitching a ride

Remoras or sucker fish attach themselves to whale sharks as a means of transport to good feeding areas and for protection. They are also thought to feed on the hosts leftovers or even on the hosts faeces.

Pilot fish can also be seen swimming alongside whale sharks, feeding on parasites or leftovers from the host



Interaction Guidelines & Information

St Helena has some spectacular marine life; seeing the majestic whale sharks during their seasonal visits here is one not to miss



Whale shark biology

- This migratory species has an IUCN status of vulnerable



Male's have claspers for reproduction

- It is the largest known species of fish. The largest confirmed individual had a length of 12.65 metres (41.50 ft) and a weight of more than

21.5 metric tons (47,000 lb), and there are unconfirmed reports of considerably larger whale sharks.

- The whale shark is found in tropical and warm oceans and lives in the open sea with a lifespan of about 70 years to 100 years



Female whale shark - potentially pregnant

- The capture of a female in July 1996 who was pregnant with 300 pups indicates that whale sharks are ovoviviparous i.e. embryos develop inside eggs that are retained within the mother's body until they are ready to hatch and the young are born live at a size of 40 to 60 cm long. There is evidence that the pups are not all born at once, but rather that the female retains sperm from one mating and produces a steady stream of pups over a prolonged period. It is believed that they reach sexual maturity at around 30 years.



Photo identification

Whale sharks are grey to light grey underneath with numerous white spots, the configuration of which can be used to identify individuals. Photographs of the left flank (from behind the gill slits and above the pectoral fin to the top of the back) can be used to identify individuals.

Whale shark research

- St Helena could be key to whale shark reproduction in the Atlantic.
- Tagging whales sharks with satellite trackers allows us to see where they migrate to after St Helena as well as gain information on how deep and how often they dive.



Feeding

Although whale sharks have very large mouths (up to 1.5m wide), as filter feeders they feed mainly on plankton including fish eggs, although occasionally they will feed on small fish.



Feeding occurs either by ram filtration, in which the animal opens its mouth and swims forward, pushing water and food into the mouth, or by active suction feeding, in which the animal opens and closes its mouth, sucking in volumes of water that are then expelled through the gills. In both cases, the filter pads serve to separate food from water. When whale sharks are in large groups or aggregations they are generally feeding on the surface.