

## Whale Shark Tourism

### Environmental Best Practice Guidelines

#### Background

The focus of these guidelines is the safeguarding of the marine habitats and the flora and fauna that live there.

St Helena has a unique marine environment with a high number of endemic species and vulnerable/sensitive annual visitors. The whale shark is the largest fish in the world. These gentle marine giants roam the oceans around the globe, generally alone. However, large numbers of whale sharks often gather in areas with abundant plankton food. Whale sharks are relatively slow moving and docile animals. On St. Helena whale sharks will readily approach boats and snorkelers if they do not feel threatened. They will often remain close if not chased or harassed, making them prime tourist attractions.

Unless tourism is managed effectively it can have damaging effects on the environment which may negate the positive influences it generates in the form of increased marine awareness. To maintain increased tourism (and hence revenue) it is imperative to protect the product people are coming to see.

Visitor education is an important part of the visitor experience. Tour operators and their staff shall demonstrate stewardship and role modelling both above and below the water in areas that they visit by practicing environmentally sustainable behaviour and by managing visitors' environmentally sustainable practices. If environmentally unsustainable practices are observed or discovered, staff members shall address them immediately – on board – by educating the visitors' on why and how to adjust their behaviour. This information is to be shared in a supportive and educational manner.

Local recreational boat owners who wish to interact with whale sharks (not for money or reward) must first attend a briefing by ENRD on interaction guidelines and will be responsible for providing interaction information to ENRD post interaction. ENRD will provide leaflets containing interaction guidelines and will offer a training session at the start of each whale shark season for local recreational boat owners who may wish to interact with whale sharks

during that season. Propeller guards are advised for all vessels conducting commercial whale shark tours both for protection of the whale sharks and for human safety.

Non local/visiting vessels e.g. yachts etc. are prohibited to interact with whale sharks unless they are accompanied by a locally accredited tour operator.

All tour operators wishing to interact with any marine megafauna outlined in this policy must obtain accreditation from the Environment and Natural Resources Directorate (ENRD) of St Helena Government.

### Briefing

A full trip and interaction briefing should be given before the tour begins, ideally prior to departing James Bay.

Along with the any safety information the following environmental information should be included in the briefing:

- A description of whale sharks and their biology.
- A description of how physical and logistical aspects of the tour will work, i.e. what will happen when a whale shark is sighted, when will visitors be allowed to enter the water, how many visitors will be allowed to enter the water (8 per shark and/or aggregation).
- Advise visitors on how whale sharks should be approached and the interaction limits i.e. keep 3 metres from the head and 4 metres from the tail, remain at the side of the whale shark.
- Advise visitors that deliberately touching or riding whale sharks is strictly prohibited.
- Advise visitors that the use of flash for underwater photography is strictly prohibited.
- Advise photographers that the health of marine life takes precedence over any photographic activity.
- Advise visitors to keep disturbance to a minimum i.e. no screaming, shouting.
- Advise where to place any litter or cigarette butts.

Additional briefings must be given on scuba tours if diving in at sites popular with whale sharks and with a higher chance of whale shark encounter. This briefing should include what to do if a whale shark appears at any point before or during the dive.

### Interactions by all vessels

During the whale shark season (1 November to 31 May), be alert and keep watch on the surface of the water.

The large size of the whale shark and the fact that it feeds close to the surface increases the risk of a collision with a boat.

If a whale shark comes within 30m of you, slow down gradually and put the engine in neutral until the animal is observed at the surface, clear of the vessel. Once the whale shark is visible, move away at a speed of no more than 2 knots until you are >500m from the whale shark.

If you are kayaking and a whale shark approaches you, remain calm and quiet and avoid sudden movements. Never paddle directly towards a whale shark or allow several kayaks to surround the animal. Stay in a group rather than stringing out around the sharks. Do not cross the path of the whale shark so that the animals can maintain their course without changing direction or speed.

### Interaction for tour operators

When searching for whale sharks be alert and watch for whale sharks at all times. Be alert for other tour vessels especially any that display an A (Alpha) flag. The A (Alpha) flag is internationally recognised as "I have people in the water; keep well clear at slow speed."

Tour boats should approach the whale shark from the side. All boats should approach whale sharks at idle speed or no more than 2 knots/hour, and remain at least 15m away from the animal(s). Vessels should not block the path of the whale shark. Snorkelers should be dropped into water 15m from the whale shark/s. At any one time only 8 snorkelers are permitted in the water with one or more (an aggregation) whale sharks. Tour vessels must display an A (Alpha) flag (internationally recognised "I have people in the water; keep well clear at slow speed." whilst snorkelers are in the water. Tour operators can have a designated, clearly identifiable safety support staff member in the water for safety.

To maintain good relationships with other users of the marine environment operators must avoid commercial fishing vessels whilst they are fishing even if whale sharks are in the vicinity of the fishing vessel.

### Interaction for multiple boats, fishermen, boat users, kayaks and personal water craft users

At any one time a maximum TWO vessels in total are allowed within the proximity of one or more (an aggregation) whale sharks on first come basis. This includes commercial and recreational vessels and is any two boats and not two boats per operator or two boats plus private individuals.

The first operator or boat to approach a whale shark within a 500 metres radius shall be deemed to be "in contact" with a whale shark. To avoid harassing the sharks and to maximize safety of the snorkelers, boats and

kayaks should keep a distance of 30m away from each other during a whale shark tour. Vessels need to cooperate to ensure maximum number of snorkelers (8 people) in the water is adhered to.

Should two vessels be in contact with a whale shark any further vessels may queue to have access to the shark by maintaining a minimum distance of 500 metres from the contacted whale shark(s) and other vessels.

### Duration of stay

A total interaction time of 45 minutes per operator/vessel is permitted with one or more (an aggregation) whale sharks. An operators' 45 minutes starts once they are 30 metres from their first whale shark or in the "immediate contact zone". Once snorkelers have returned to the boat, leave the area immediately to give other operators and guests an opportunity with a whale shark at a speed less than 2 knots until outside the contact zone.

### Signs of disturbance

Observe whale shark behaviour and move away if whale sharks show signs of disturbance and behaviour indicates the whale shark is not happy with interaction. The following behaviour from whale sharks indicates signs of disturbance:

- Banking or "giving you the shoulder" when nearing snorkelers or divers
- Noticeably increasing its swimming speed to avoid snorkelers, divers or the boat
- Moving away and rapidly diving deep
- Shuddering

### Interaction for snorkelers and freedivers

All snorkelers and free divers must be given a whale shark interaction briefing and must adhere to the guidelines given.

Snorkelers should be dropped into water 15 meters from the whale shark/s. Keep disturbance to a minimum.

Entry and exit into the water should be done in a quiet manner to keep disturbance to a minimum i.e. no screaming, shouting. A minimum distance of 3 meters should be kept from the whale sharks body and 4 meters from the whale sharks tail. Snorkelers should aim to remain at the side of the whale shark at all times. At no time should snorkelers deliberately block the path of whale sharks. Snorkelers should not touch or ride on whale

sharks. Snorkelers should also not use flash in any underwater photography. Snorkelers must follow the instructions of the tour operator, including all safety instructions and must return to the vessel when instructed.

### Interaction for SCUBA divers

Deliberate scuba diving with whale sharks unless for scientific purposes is forbidden and in receipt of a valid research licence.

Additional briefings must be given on scuba tours if diving in at sites popular with whale sharks. The following information should be included;

- Should scuba divers arrive at dive site and whale sharks be visible on the surface within proximity of the boat and dive site, and during dive preparation time, scuba divers must not enter the water equipped with scuba diving equipment.
- Should a whale shark appear whilst scuba divers are on the surface, divers should exit the water.
- Should a whale shark appear during a dive where divers are below the surface, scuba divers should adhere to the following;
  - Do not approach or chase the whale sharks; remain stationary in the water and make slow movements
  - Scuba divers are to remain on one side of the whale shark if possible – do not deliberately block the whale sharks path;
  - All scuba divers are to remain a minimum of 20m swimming distance away from the whale sharks;
  - Tour operators, dive leaders and scuba divers should observe whale shark behaviour and move themselves and their group away immediately if this behaviour indicates the whale shark is not happy with interaction.

### Prohibited activities

Under the 'POLICY FOR MARINE SPECIES INTERACTION ACTIVITIES ON ST HELENA ISLAND TO MINIMISE RISK OF INJURY AND DISTURBANCE' and formerly the 'environmental policy for whale shark (*rhincodon typus*), devil ray (*mobula tarapacana*) and cetacean interaction activities on St. Helena Island to minimize risk of injury and disturbance' the following is prohibited:

- Deliberate scuba diving with whale sharks unless for scientific purposes and in receipt of a valid research licence.
- Feeding of whales sharks.
- Deliberately chasing, touching or riding whale sharks. This is a fineable offence under the Environmental Protection Ordinance.
- The use of flash for underwater photography.
- Use of a motorised propulsion device.

### Prohibited vessels

The following vessels are prohibited from interacting with whale sharks

- Jet-skis
- Towing craft e.g.- Inflatable craft being towed by a speed boat/water skis
- Remotely operated craft
- Hover craft
- Wing-in-ground effect craft
- Parasail's

### Dumping

All equipment used in the tour and any food consumed during the tour or litter created as a result of this should be returned to the shore and stored or disposed of in the correct manner. Vessels should make special provisions for the disposal of cigarettes should they have a designated smoking area.