

# Threatened Species of the Northern Territory

## WHALE SHARK

### *Rhincodon typus*

#### Conservation status

Australia: Vulnerable

Northern Territory: Data Deficient



Photo: AIMS

#### Description

The whale shark is the world's largest fish, reaching a size of 20m. It is easily distinguished by its large size, broad flattened head, large mouth and pattern of light spots and stripes on a dark background (Last and Stevens 1994). Its ventral surface is white.

#### Distribution

The whale shark has a broad distribution across most tropical and warm temperate seas. The best known populations in Australia are around Ningaloo Reef, in north-western Australia. Its distribution and status in waters around the Northern Territory is poorly known, although there are at least some anecdotal records.

*Conservation reserves where reported:*  
None.

#### Ecology

The whale shark is extremely long-lived, reaching sexual maturity at about 30 years, and having a lifespan estimated at about 100 years. It feeds primarily by suction filter feeding, and its diet includes a broad range of plankton, small crustaceans and small schooling fish.

Whale sharks may aggregate in nutrient-rich waters to feed on seasonal concentrations of tropical krill and small fish.

The whale shark is highly migratory, with Western Australian populations known to disperse to waters around Christmas Island and Indonesia. They move more broadly around the Indian Ocean and towards the Philippines.

#### Conservation assessment

The whale shark is recognised as Vulnerable nationally, largely because of decline due mainly to harvesting pressure in areas outside its seasonal Australian range. There is too little information in the NT to assess its status, or to evaluate the significance of the NT population relative to other areas in Australia. As such, it is regarded as **Data Deficient** in the NT.

#### Threatening processes

The main threat to whale sharks is targeted commercial fishing and unregulated hunting (operating outside Australian waters) of populations that seasonally visit Australian waters. Within Australian waters, the main recognised threats are reduction in food resources and disturbance by tourists

(Environment Australia 2005) and illegal fishing.

## **Conservation objectives and management**

A national recovery plan for this species was established in 2005 (Environment Australia 2005). This includes actions to increase levels of international cooperation for the conservation management of the species, and to maintain and develop monitoring programs.

## **Compilers**

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## **References**

- Environment Australia (2005). *Whale shark (Rhincodon typus) recovery plan, 2005-2010*. (Environment Australia, Canberra.)
- Last, P.R., and Stevens, J.D. (1994). *Sharks and Rays of Australia*. (CSIRO, Melbourne.)