

# LIBRARY

Department of Biodiversity,  
Conservation and Attractions

This PDF has been created for digital preservation. It may be used for research but is not suitable for other purposes. It may be superseded by a more current version or just be out-of-date and have no relevance to current situations.



Photo - Doug Coughran

## WHALE SHARKS

The mass spawning of more than 200 species of coral in March and April each year is part of a chain of biological events that heralds the arrival, in Ningaloo Marine Park, of the world's largest fish, the whale shark (*Rhiniodon typus*).

These gentle giants cruise the world's oceans in search of concentrations of zooplankton. They have thousands of tiny teeth arranged in more than 300 rows, but they neither bite nor chew their food. Water is drawn into their large mouths and strained through gills, where a fine mesh of gill rakes extract the tiny plankton. They are also thought to supplement their diet periodically with squid and small fish such as anchovies and sardines.

Whale sharks are found in a band around the equator between about 30° north and 35° south. They prefer surface water temperatures between 22°C and 27°C where cool nutrient-rich currents mingle with warm plankton-laden waters. Their backs are darker in colour than their bellies, but both have white spots almost five centimetres in diameter. They have been reported to reach 18 metres in length, but are more commonly 4-12 metres. They are known to weigh up to 11 tonnes and are long-lived, but just how old they become is unknown.

Ningaloo Reef is the only place in the world where whale sharks are known to appear regularly in any numbers, in near-shore waters, easily accessible to observers.

## WHO TO CONTACT

Details of whale shark observations can be left at:

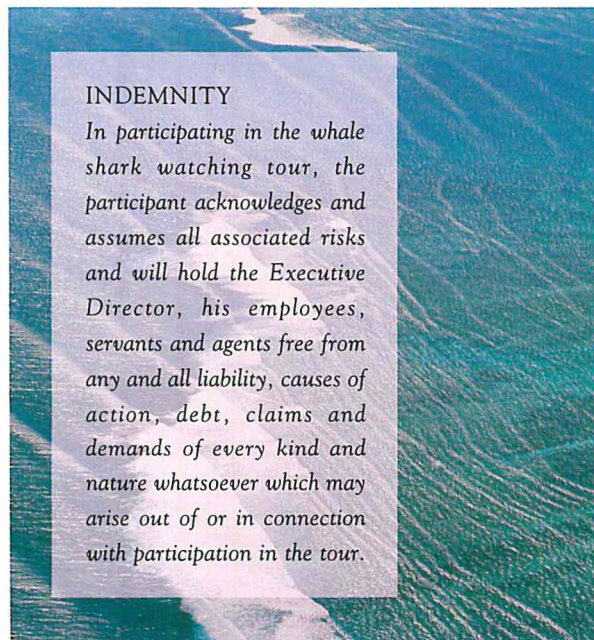
EXMOUTH DISTRICT OFFICE  
Payne St (Old Shire Chambers)  
PO Box 201  
EXMOUTH WA 6707  
Ph (099) 49 1676 Fax (099) 49 1580

MILYERING VISITOR CENTRE  
Cape Range National Park  
Phone/Fax (099) 49 2808

PILBARA REGIONAL OFFICE  
SGIO Building  
Welcome Road  
KARRATHA WA 6714  
Ph (091) 86 8288 Fax (091) 44 1118



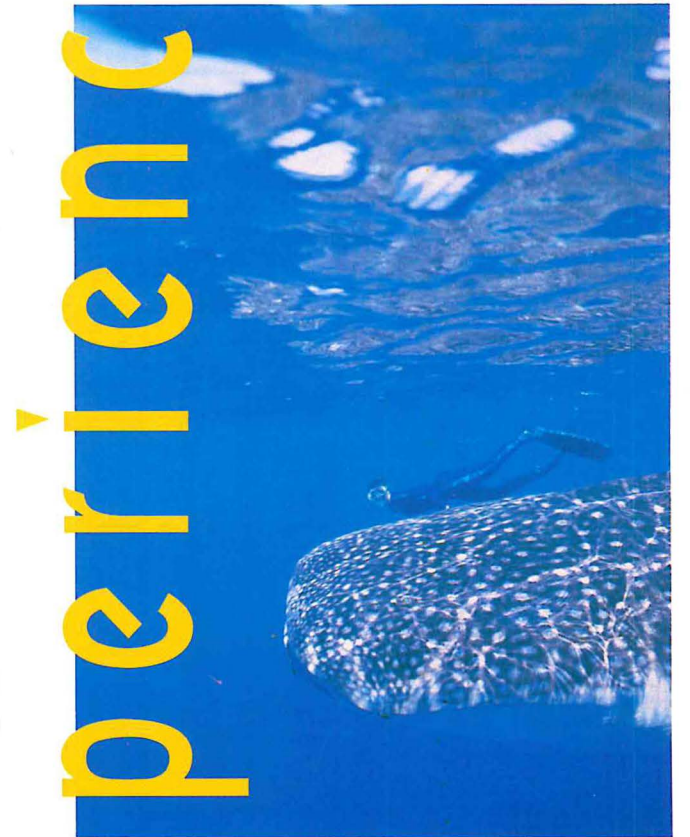
DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION  
AND LAND MANAGEMENT



### INDEMNITY

*In participating in the whale shark watching tour, the participant acknowledges and assumes all associated risks and will hold the Executive Director, his employees, servants and agents free from any and all liability, causes of action, debt, claims and demands of every kind and nature whatsoever which may arise out of or in connection with participation in the tour.*

# WHALE SHARKS in NINGALOO MARINE PARK



# Experience

A GUIDE FOR PASSENGERS  
OF COMMERCIAL TOURS



DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION  
AND LAND MANAGEMENT

B1/05-59





# HOW YOU CAN HELP

CALM is interested in any information you can acquire about whale sharks. You can assist skippers by helping to record the following details when you next see a whale shark:

- date, time and location
- weather and sea conditions
- number of sharks seen
- gender of each animal
- their behaviour
- approximate length of each shark
- lateral markings (located 60–90 cm behind the gill slits. Note both sides if possible) and scars\*
- tags\* (these resemble marlin tags and are thin strips of plastic about 3 cm long, often covered in weed).

*\*Photographs provide a useful method of recording these details and help in the identification of individual sharks.*

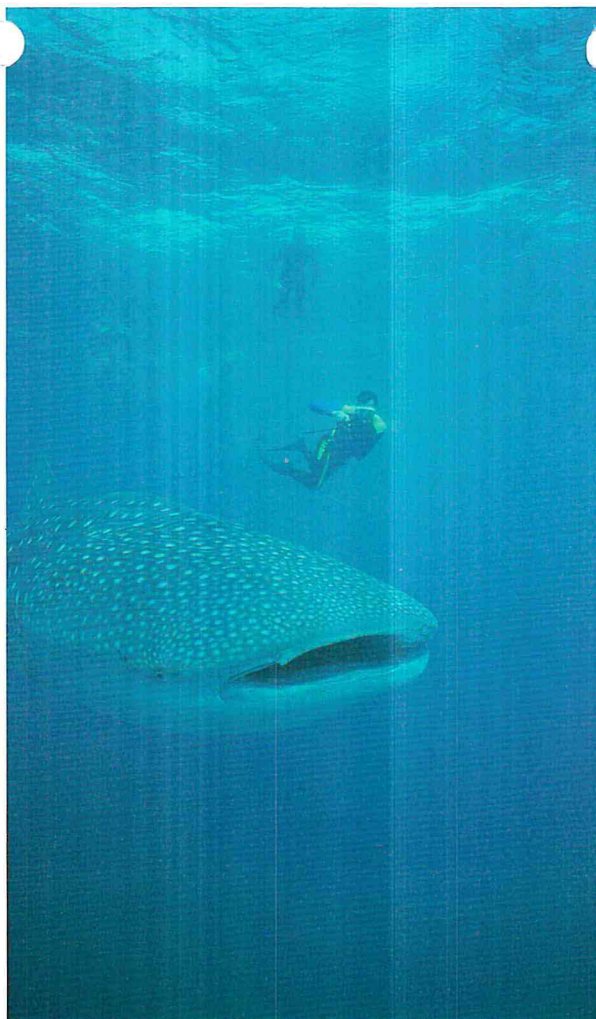
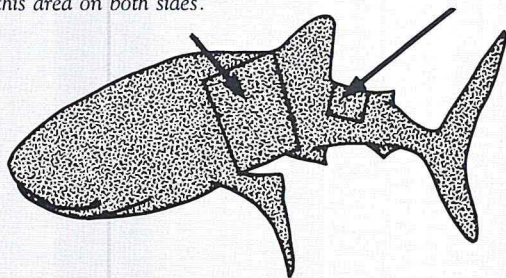
*Photographs should be dated and recorded on the skipper's data sheet.*

**Please do not use flash as this may upset the sharks.**

## WHERE TO LOOK FOR TAGS AND LATERAL MARKINGS

*Scars and lateral markings can be seen in this area on both sides.*

*Tag sites.*



Photo—Simon Jones



# QUESTIONNAIRE

One way that you can assist in protecting whale sharks is to complete the following short questionnaire. We do not wish to know details about you in particular, but rather what type of person comes to interact with whale sharks, what facilities are needed, and what experiences he or she expects. The questionnaire can be mailed **free of charge** anywhere in Australia. Thank you.

- (1) Country of permanent residence \_\_\_\_\_
- (1a) Postcode (Australian permanent residents only) \_\_\_\_\_
- (2) How long have you spent in the following:
 

North West Cape Area?	Western Australia?
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 - 7 days	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 - 7 days
<input type="checkbox"/> 8 - 28 days	<input type="checkbox"/> 8 - 28 days
<input type="checkbox"/> Longer	<input type="checkbox"/> Longer
- (3) Did you first find out about whale sharks at Ningaloo from a:
 

<input type="checkbox"/> television program?	<input type="checkbox"/> radio program?
<input type="checkbox"/> local tourist bureau?	<input type="checkbox"/> newspaper?
<input type="checkbox"/> magazine?	<input type="checkbox"/> other?
- (4) Have you been whale shark watching before?  Yes  No
- (5) Would you return to Ningaloo Reef to whale shark watch again?  
 Yes  No
- (6) What comments do you have on your whale shark experience?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- (7) Do you wish to have further information sent to you about:
 

other WA national parks?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
other WA ecotourism attractions?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
the role of CALM?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
LANDSCOPE magazine?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

If you would like further information, please write your name and address:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ P/code \_\_\_\_\_

Return questionnaire to: **REPLAY PAID NO 36**  
(no stamp required) **Tourism & Community Involvement**  
**Dept of Conservation & Land Management**  
**PO Box 104**  
**COMO WA 6152**



## WATCHING WHALE SHARKS

Whale sharks are fully protected under the Wildlife Conservation Act and the CALM Act. Although they appear to be 'gentle giants', they are wild animals that can inflict serious injury if they strike a swimmer with their body, tail or fins. To minimise the risk of injury and to prevent the animals from being harmed or disturbed, the following code of conduct has been prepared for passengers on commercial tours.

### SWIMMERS IN THE CONTACT ZONE:

- must not attempt to touch or ride on a whale shark, block a shark from its chosen direction of movement or approach closer than one metre from the head or body and four metres from its tail;
- must not undertake flash photography or use motorised propulsion aids;
- are limited to a maximum of 10 people in the water at any one time.

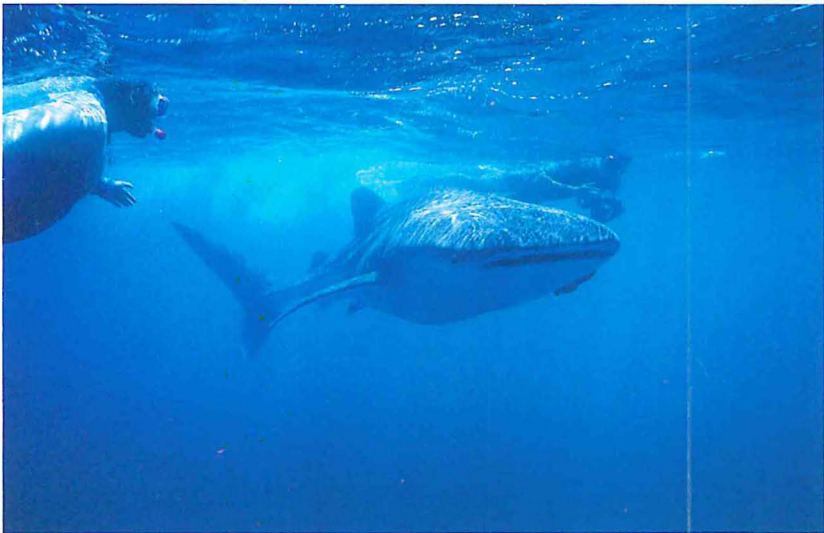


Photo - Pip O'Dell

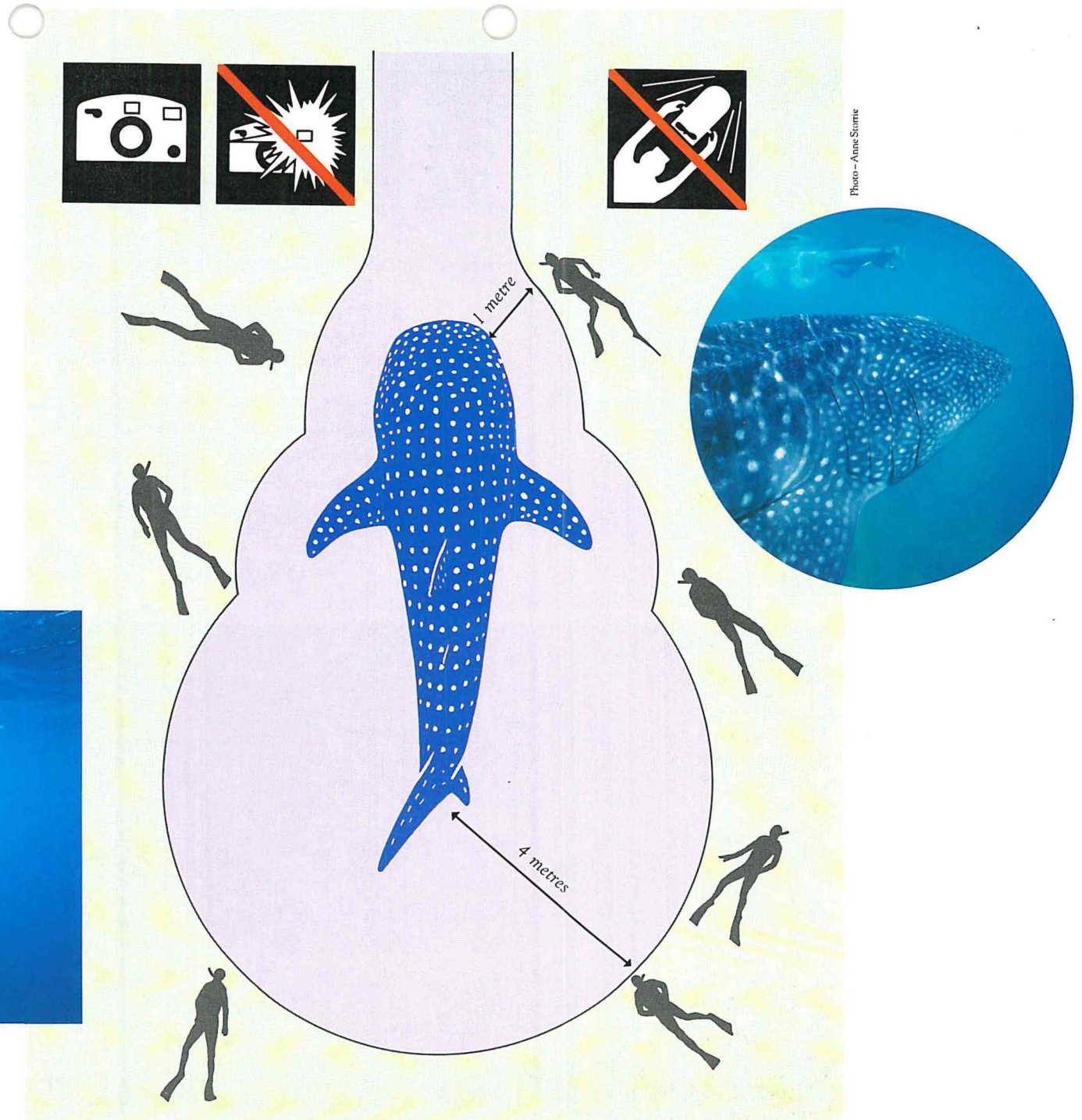


Photo - Anne Stormie





## CALM'S ROLE IN WHALE SHARK WATCHING

The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) conserves and manages Western Australia's wildlife and the lands, waters and resources entrusted to the Department for the benefit of present and future generations.

CALM, therefore, ensures that access to natural attractions is well managed, is ecologically sustainable, and only occurs where appropriate. To do this requires a diverse range of skilled professional staff including scientists, rangers, wildlife officers, recreation planners and commercial operations administrators.

CALM tries to recover the cost of management and research activities through a system of licence charges on tour operators. By doing this, commercial whale shark watching can be managed to be both ecologically and economically sustainable.

Tour operators are expected to provide their passengers with a safe, interactive tour with the whale sharks without causing harm to the animals.

Participation in whale shark tours, therefore, provides a direct benefit to further research into whale shark behaviour and ensure that future generations will also have the opportunity to swim with whale sharks at Ningaloo.



Photo - Doug Coughran

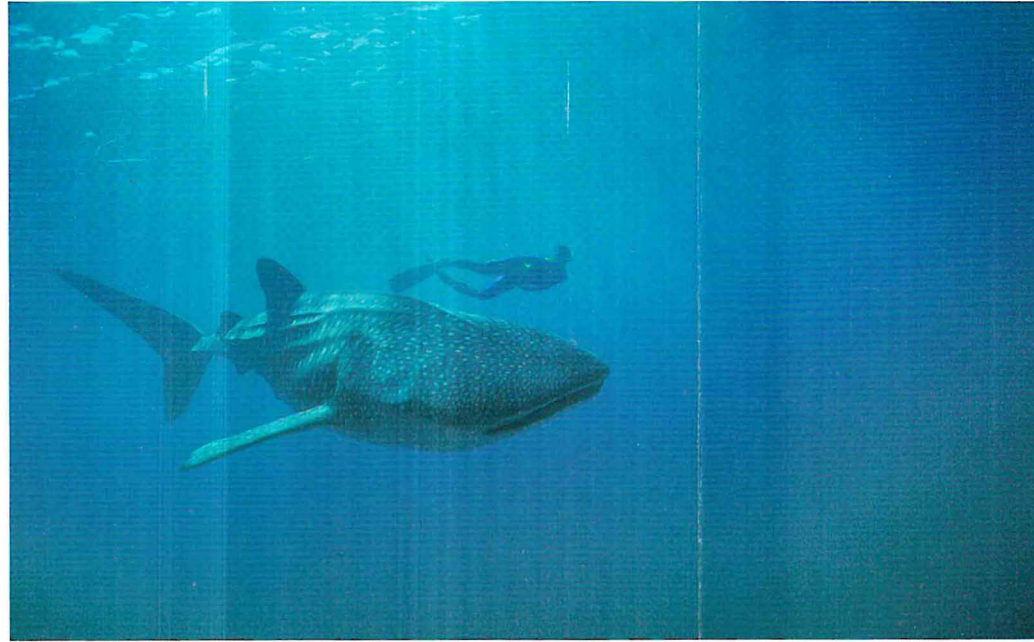


Photo - Simon Jones



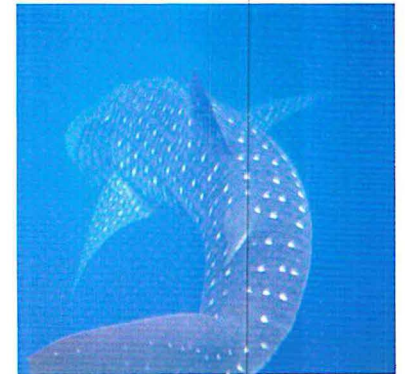
## RESEARCH

Very little is known about whale shark numbers, their behaviour patterns, or how much human contact they will tolerate before becoming disturbed and perhaps leaving the area. Care must be taken to ensure that we do not lose the best-known whale shark observation area in the world.

There is almost no scientific information about whale sharks' migratory patterns, breeding behaviour or even precisely what species of zooplankton they eat.

Researchers have looked at whale shark distribution and abundance patterns along the Ningaloo Reef. Plankton sampling has been carried out to identify further the sharks' food species. New initiatives include identification programs to help recognise individual sharks through their lateral markings and scar patterns. Other developments include the use of 'smart tags', which are digital data loggers attached to the dorsal fin, to record animal position and depth for periods of up to nine years.

and sociological research into the tourism aspects of whale shark interactions.



Photos - Doug Coughran

