



SWIMMING WITH SHARKS

by John Huisman and Mike van Keulen

A short ride from the boat ramp in Coral Bay is a fascinating 'shark cleaning station', where sharks come to get cleaned and the fish that do the work reap the benefits of this special symbiotic relationship. A commercial tour to the area is the best way for people to observe this natural phenomenon while also enjoying the other marine life that populates the area.

Most people would not willingly jump into the ocean to see dozens of sharks, especially not without the protective cages offered to the more adventurous types on the well-known tours to see great whites in South Australia. Yet here we are, about to do just that. We are expecting grey reef sharks (*Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos*), a species not known to be a killer but that can be quite aggressive. Field guides describe them as 'dangerous', and they have been known to attack humans.

We're at a place called 'Asho's Gap', only a short boat ride from the boat ramp in Coral Bay in Ningaloo Marine Park. After entering the water we snorkel west through a narrow channel in the reef, before finding our way to a large bommie of cabbage coral (*Turbinaria* sp.) in about 12 metres of water. We keep a respectful distance, not out of fear, but to ensure that we don't spook what we've come to see. The water is clear and blue, and in the distance some familiar torpedo outlines start to take shape, heading straight for us. Remembering our charter skipper's reassuring words, "they're not here to eat", only slightly reduces the tension.

The sharks swim in seemingly random patterns around the coral bommie, before one eventually faces into the current

and comes to a stop in an almost vertical position. At this point the shark opens its mouth and a tiny wrasse darts in and out amongst the razor-sharp teeth, a place where no sensible fish would willingly choose to be. But the shark remains docile and throughout the interaction leaves the wrasse unharmed, before both eventually move on. Why the uncharacteristic behaviour? We're actually at what's known as a 'cleaning station', but not one catering to regular fish. The Asho's Gap station is almost exclusively used by sharks, primarily the aforementioned grey reef sharks, although the site is also visited by turtles and large groupers. Cleaning stations are particular locations where fish can come and have their gills and teeth picked clean by certain species of wrasses. At Coral Bay, these are the bluestreak cleaner wrasse (*Labroides dimidiatus*) and the moon wrasse, (*Thalassoma lunare*). The benefit to the subject is obvious, all those parasites and remnants of food are no longer causing problems, and the cleaner wrasse has a meal delivered. Of course there is an intimate understanding between the cleaner and the cleaned; this service will only continue if the wrasse is itself not eaten. After all, what fish would voluntarily enter a shark's mouth!



CLEANING STATION

Cleaning stations are not uncommon, but those catering for large sharks are generally offshore and not easily accessible to divers and snorkelers. Coral Bay provides an excellent opportunity to see this unusual and spectacular phenomenon up close. Several charter operators include a snorkel at Asho's Gap as part of longer tours, which can also take in a swim with manta rays (*Manta alfredi*), another wildlife encounter that should not be missed. The mantas frequently use a series of cleaning stations around Bateman Bay. Where they're found depends on the time of day and the season – they have different movement patterns around the bay throughout the year, probably depending on food availability. On this occasion the intention is indeed to feed, but as these gentle giants consume only plankton there is no danger to the snorkelers. A spotter plane is used to locate the mantas and radio their positions to the tour operators, who take it in turns to drop small groups of snorkelers in the path of the mantas, which sweep in like graceful gliders, their black dorsal surfaces clearly marking them from the sandy bottom. Initially the melee of snorkelers, all keen for a glimpse, can be a little crowded and the water becomes a churning mass, all arms and legs and frantic finning, but eventually the group splits and the scene becomes



more relaxed. The agile mantas put on a spectacular show, executing turns and tumbles, seemingly (but obviously not) choreographed for the benefit of the watching snorkelers. While they are here primarily to feed, using two lobes either side of their mouths to channel the plankton laden seawater, an encounter with a member of the opposite sex can also provoke a flurry of activity. The mantas will often swim at a relaxed pace, but then in an instant put on a short burst of speed, with no obvious effort. For the snorkelers, keeping up with a manta at full speed is almost impossible, but they will often double back and an encounter is almost guaranteed.

These spectacular encounters should be on the 'must do' list for anyone visiting Coral Bay and a trip on an organised tour is the only way to guarantee sightings. Visit Parks and Wildlife's 'Explore Parks WA' website for more information.

Do it yourself

Where is it? Asho's Gap is approximately 2.8 kilometres north-west of Coral Bay Boat Ramp.

What to do: Snorkelling, swimming, kayaking, diving.

Take a tour: A number of operators provide a wide range of tours departing from Coral Bay. Swim with whale sharks or manta rays, see migrating humpback whales, or view the reef from a glass bottom boat. Join a snorkel or dive tour, cruise on a catamaran, take a scenic flight or learn to scuba dive. Search for tours at Tourism Western Australia.

Equipment hire, accommodation, restaurants, fuel and general supplies are all available.

Marine park zones and fishing: Coral Bay is adjacent to the Maud Sanctuary Zone of Ningaloo Marine Park – a look but don't take zone. There is a special purpose (shore-based activities) zone immediately to the south where recreational fishing for finfish only and from the shore only is permitted.

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Main Grey reef sharks at Asho's Gap.

Photo – Mike van Keulen/Murdoch University

Above left Wrasse perform the task of 'cleaning' the sharks' teeth.

Photo – John Huisman/Parks and Wildlife

Below Manta rays also frequent the area.

Photo – Clay Bryce/Lochman Transparencies



John Huisman is the curator of the Western Australian Herbarium and specialises in marine botany. He is a regular contributor to *LANDSCOPE* and can be contacted by email (john.huisman@dpaw.wa.gov.au).

Mike van Keulen is a senior lecturer in the School of Veterinary and Life Sciences at Murdoch University and also the director of the Coral Bay Research Station. He can be contacted by email (M.Keulen@murdoch.edu.au).