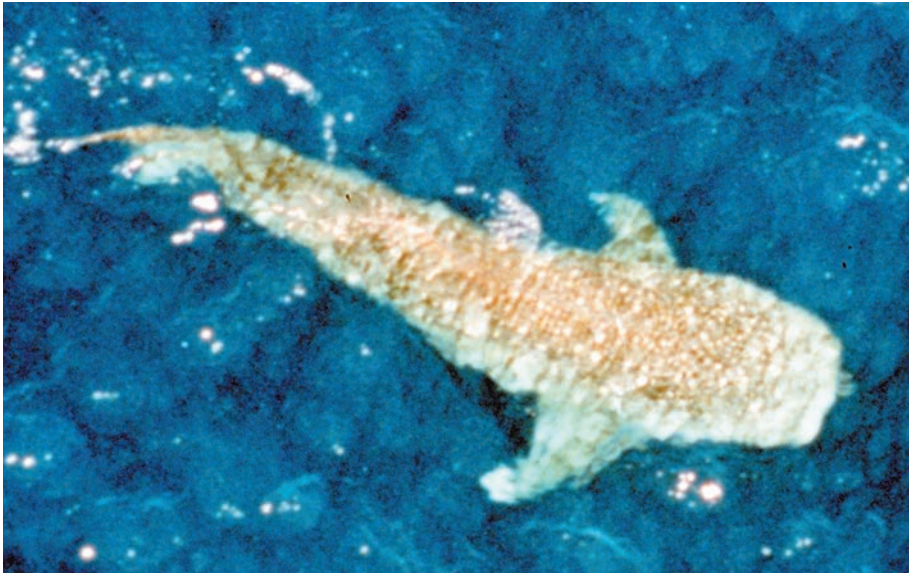


# Threatened whale sharks draw calls to end exploitation



The whale shark, *Rhincodon typus*, the world's largest fish, reaches a length of up to 18 m and is found in tropical and warm temperate seas throughout the world. High prices are paid in Taiwan for the meat while the fins are also valuable and exploitation can be expected to increase. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Eighty marine science experts from 23 countries, who attended an international marine conference in Perth during May, have issued a plea for countries to work more vigorously at protecting the unique, migratory whale shark – the largest fish in the world – and its global habitat areas.

A communiqué issued at the end of the conference called on all nations and governments to facilitate a rapid transition away from harvesting of whale sharks to sustainable alternatives, such as carefully managed eco-tourism. It stamped the huge filter-feeding fish as vital for the maintenance of biodiversity, the health of marine ecosystems and appreciation by future generations.

The communiqué said '... the evidence points to serious declines in the abundance of whale sharks in some parts of the world following even short periods of exploitation.' The species is now listed as 'vulnerable' by the International Conservation Union.

The conference was convened by Australia's Strategic Research Fund for the Marine Environment (SRFME). SRFME Research Director, CSIRO's Dr John

Keesing, said that while there is cause for heightened concern over the state of global populations there is also cause for optimism.

'The whale shark's greatest asset is its enormous popularity. Time and again conference papers pointed to the species being worth far more alive than dead. The challenge now is to bring this fact to bear on those corners of the world where viable, sustainable alternatives to harvesting, such as eco-tourism, have not yet taken hold,' Dr Keesing said.

A conference paper from Belize valued a live whale shark at US\$34 000 a year as a tourist drawcard. The same animal would return US\$6000 if slaughtered for the Taiwan market. Whale shark tourism at Western Australia's Ningaloo Reef is valued at \$12 million a year.

On being presented the communiqué, the Western Australia's Minister for Science and the Environment, Dr Judy Edwards said 'I hope delegates will take this communiqué back to their own countries and urge their governments to respond with more urgent action to progress protection internationally.'

'Equally, more research is urgently

needed, so that the full range of threats to whale sharks such as harvesting, habitat degradation and over-zealous tourism ventures could be fully understood.'

The communiqué also calls for greater local, regional and international effort and collaboration in:

- researching such things as shark behaviour, life-history biology, genetics and ecological interactions with and dependencies on the physical and bio-geochemical environment; and
- whale shark conservation, including wildlife and habitat protection agreements, fisheries monitoring and management programs, education, community based conservation projects, and economic feasibility studies.

Dr Judy Edwards said a catalyst for initiating the conference was the growing importance of nature-based tourism and whale shark watching at Ningaloo Reef.

'The dependence of this important ecotourism industry on the annual migration of whale sharks to Ningaloo from March to June means it is vital Western Australia takes a lead in pressing for international efforts to protect the species,' Dr Edwards said.

'While scientists still know little about the migration patterns of whale sharks to and from Ningaloo, it is likely they are subjected to harvesting after leaving Australia's northern waters,' Dr Keesing says.

'Outside Australia, ecotourism centres developed near to where whale sharks aggregate have been established in Mexico, the Philippines and Belize. As our knowledge of the sharks' migration and aggregation patterns grows, we hope to see similar ecotourism centres develop in communities right along their migration routes,' he said.

'Ecotourism is the obvious answer to reversing the effects harvesting is having on numbers of this magnificent species and scientists here and overseas want to work towards that end with government and the ecotourism industry.'

Illegal and legal hunting for whale sharks in Asia is the suspected primary reason for the decline in numbers.

Dr Keesing says a plan to develop cooperative research projects among Indian Ocean Rim countries would accelerate moves to ensure whale sharks become the object of profitable ecotourism enterprises rather than unsustainable harvesting practices.