

World's biggest fish benefiting at Ningaloo

Numbers of whale shark are steady and even increasing in some areas off Ningaloo, Western Australia, according to a recent paper published in *Endangered Species Research*.



Credit: Steve Lindfield, ECOCEAN

The authors of the paper – based on an analysis of data collected by Earthwatch volunteers, tourists, divers and researchers – have issued a worldwide call to holiday makers and divers to join in a global effort to monitor and protect the largest – and one of the rarest – fish in the sea.

‘Thanks to increasing levels of data collection, we’re finally able to estimate how many whale sharks appear annually, how long they typically remain at Ningaloo Marine Park (NMP), their patterns of arrival and departure, and shifts in their population structure,’ says one of the authors, Brad Norman, founder of the independent ECOCEAN whale shark project (see *ECOS* 133 and 137).

Jason Holmberg, lead author on the ESR study states that ‘we have been able to create statistical models demonstrating a modestly increasing annual population of around 150 sharks. We’re also seeing an increase in the number of smaller whale sharks feeding at the reef and returning in subsequent years.’

‘For the first time, our recent study demonstrates a set of population models that can be expanded to incorporate other whale shark aggregations in the Indian Ocean if and when sharks can be linked between them.’

The study complements another just published with Curtin University, Western Australia, which acknowledges the whale shark ecotourism industry as a AU\$ 4.76 million boon for local communities working to protect this threatened species.

Similar economic benefits could be available at other whale shark “hotspots” around the world.

A related study in the Philippines in collaboration with WWF has so far recorded 250 individual animals, while another in Mozambique has confirmed sightings of more than 350 identified individuals.

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