

# WHALE SHARK

## SCIENTIFIC CLASSIFICATION

Kingdom : Animalia  
 Phylum : Chordata  
 Class : Chondrichthyes  
 Subclass : Elasmobranchii  
 Superorder : Selachimorpha  
 Order : Orectolobiformes  
 Family : Rhincodontidae  
 Genus : *Rhincodon*  
 Species : *Rhincodon typus*

## CONSERVATION STATUS

EX EW CR **EN** VU NT LC  
 Extinct Endangered Threatened

Maximum Size  
**20 metres**  
 Average size  
**10 metres**  
 Maximum Weight  
**34000 kilograms**

## REMORAS

Due to their size and tropical ocean distribution, whale sharks are often accompanied by large numbers of remoras. These fish attach themselves to the body of the shark and feed on parasites, body tissue and scraps of food and faeces from the host.

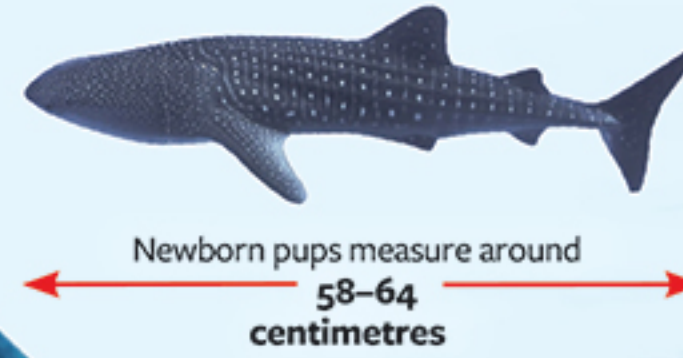
## GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

Whale sharks are a primarily pelagic species found in all tropical and warm temperate seas except the Mediterranean. The core distribution is between 30 degrees north and 35 degrees south and is likely temperature limited as they are rarely sighted in surface temperatures below 21 degrees centigrade. Genetic results indicate that two major subpopulations exist, one in the Atlantic Ocean and the other in the Indo-Pacific.

Area of distribution

## REPRODUCTION

Little is known about their reproductive behaviour, and mating and pupping of whale sharks have never been observed. They are ovoviviparous, with the only pregnant shark to ever be studied carrying more than 300 pups, the largest of which measured 58–64 centimetres in length.



## VERTICAL FEEDING

Whale sharks also feed passively in a vertical position at the surface, where they open and close their huge mouths to suck in large volumes of water and catch their prey.



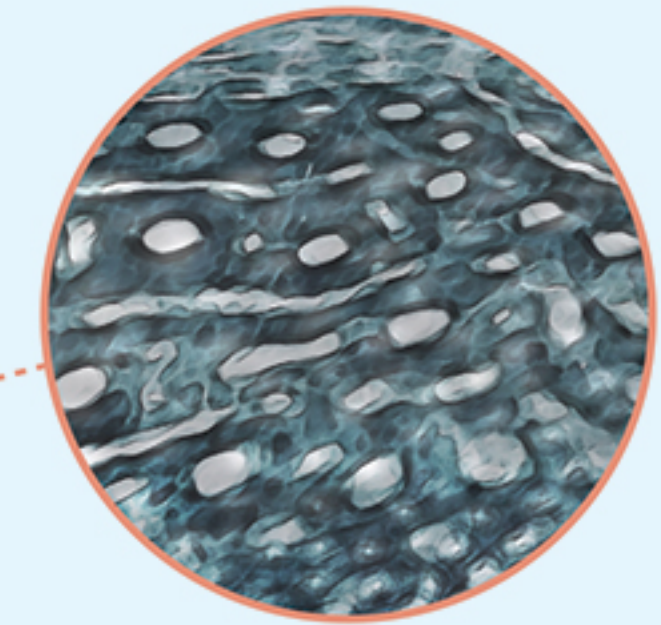
## PREDATORS

Juveniles are vulnerable to sharks and other large marine predators because of their size and have been found inside the stomachs of blue marlin and blue sharks. Larger sharks such as great whites and orcas have the potential to target larger individuals although such incidents have yet to be witnessed.



## UNIQUE SPOTS

Every whale shark has a unique pattern of spots that never changes, much like a human fingerprint. By capturing underwater images of the upper torso, scientists are able to identify and track individual sharks, enabling them to collect important data about the behaviour of each animal.



## HABITAT

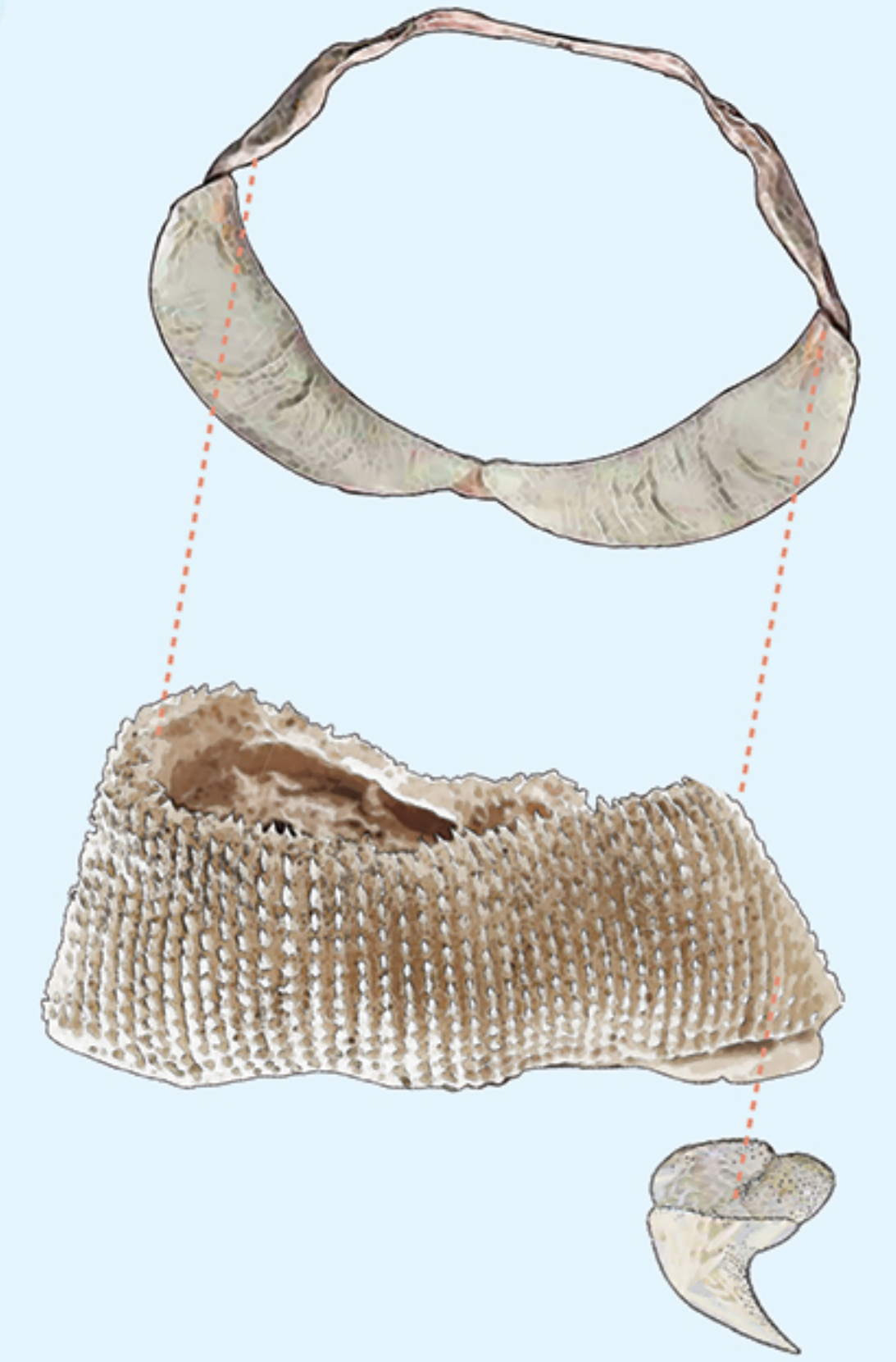
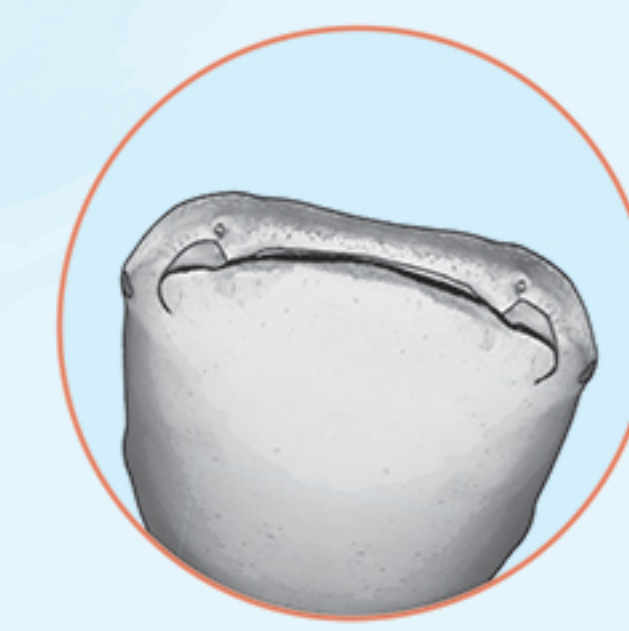
Typically seen offshore, they have been found closer to land, entering lagoons, coral atolls and river mouths. This species is capable of diving to depths of at least 1286 metres, though they are most often seen at the surface. Seasonal aggregations occur at several coastal sites, where hundreds of individuals gather to take advantage of a reliable food source.

## TOURISM

Despite its immense size, the whale shark poses no threat to humans. Encounters are possible while scuba diving, but the best way to swim with these gentle giants is to snorkel with them at the surface. One of the best places to do this is in Isla Mujeres (Mexico), where hundreds of individuals gather seasonally to feed on spawning bonito eggs. Other famous aggregations occur in Australia, the Philippines and the Maldives.

## JAWS AND TEETH

The head is broad and flat with a short snout. The mouth can be up to 1.5 metres wide and contains around 300 rows of tiny scale-like teeth that appear to play no role in the feeding process.



## DIET

One of only three known filter feeding species, the whale shark survives on a diet of planktonic and nektonic prey. It feeds by swimming with its huge mouth open through nutrient rich water and capturing large quantities of zoo- and phytoplankton, krill, roe, small crustaceans, squid and fish through a filtration process.

