



*Championing UK's most special species:
the wildlife of UK's Overseas Territories (UKOTs) and
Crown Dependencies (CDs)*

FACT-SHEET ON:

**Whale Shark *Rhincodon typus*
UK Overseas Territory: St Helena**

Whale Sharks are giants of the ocean, the largest shark species. An average adult Whale Shark can measure up to around 10m and weigh around 9000kg. They are filter-feeders, eating mostly plankton and small fish. They are slow-moving, but highly mobile, the species being found in tropical oceans. Lifespan is thought to be around 70 years. The characteristic spots found on the skin are unique to each individual, like a finger print.

Aggregations of Whale Sharks are common. However, little is known about their reproduction. Mating has been witnessed several times off St Helena, a UK Overseas Territory in the South Atlantic, where they are known as Bone Shark. They are frequently seen here between January and March.

Importance: St Helena is thought to be the only place in the world where males and females congregate in large numbers. Researchers on St Helena and Georgia Museum are gaining more knowledge about Whale Sharks to inform conservation efforts by local NGO, St Helena National Trust, and global ocean advocates, Blue Marine Foundation. Some of these efforts include capacity-building on island, education and outreach. Highlights of this work include the annual Whale Shark Festival and the virtual reality whale shark experience which uses 260 underwater cameras without getting viewers wet!

Ecosystem: They are a highly pelagic (mobile) species. They are found mainly in open oceans in tropical seas. They are rarely found where the sea-temperature dips to below 21°C and are restricted to 30° latitude or lower.

Threats: They are listed as Endangered by the IUCN Red List, due to the impact of fisheries, including by-catch losses and vessel strikes, combined with late maturation in their long life-span. They are an Annex II species as defined by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), to which the UK is a signatory. Their presence in some countries at certain times of the year is a major tourist attraction and, in some countries, this has become unsustainable. They are also vulnerable to the continued illegal trade in shark-fins. Plastic pollution is now recognized as a major threat to the sharks as they mistake (or their feeding method cannot avoid) fragments for plankton, one of their main food sources.

Needs: Many of the threats will require cooperation between many countries and jurisdictions in order to protect this species on issues such as: plastics, illegal trade, and strikes from shipping. More research is needed to underpin their conservation.

In 2016, St Helena declared an IUCN category VI marine protected area, allowing only sustainable use. As part of the UK Government's support via the Blue Belt Programme, St Helena is improving laboratory facilities, with the aim of providing the island with a world-class marine research facility and centre of excellence.



*Whale Shark in St Helena's waters:
above © Paul Tyson; below © St Helena National Trust*

