

5.5 Whale Shark Migrations

The whale shark is the largest fish in the ocean, reportedly attaining lengths of 17 m, although individuals longer than 14 m are now rarely encountered. It occurs in all tropical and most sub-temperate waters and is capable of enormous movements across ocean basins.

The whale shark is generally solitary, although aggregations may occur in response to localized abundance of its food. In KZN, individuals are usually seen swimming at the surface, parallel to the coast, within 1 km of the shoreline.

For the last decade the KZN Sharks Board has been conducting aerial surveys to assess whale shark numbers and attain a better understanding as to their migrations. There are huge inter-annual variations in the density of whale sharks ranging from 0-1.6 sharks per 100 km of coastline in 2001/2002 to a peak of 4.5-21 sharks per 100 km in 2006. Subsequently, numbers have dropped and most commonly the densities are 5-10 sharks per 100 km. Although whale sharks may be present throughout the year, they are more abundant in the warmer months.¹

Distribution along the coast is by no means uniform. The whale sharks are most common along the far northern KZN coast, from Cape Vidal to the Mozambique border. Few sharks have been recorded along the coast from St Lucia to the Thukela; this is undoubtedly due to the highly turbid water forcing them offshore or into slightly deeper water to avoid the silt. There is a second density peak 50-100 km south of Durban. At this stage there is no obvious explanation for the bi-modal distribution, but it is possibly linked to coastal oceanographic features (*Section 2.3*).

Whale sharks are prone to stranding on the South African coast² and the incidence of such events appear to be far higher than anywhere else in the world. In KZN, 61 strandings have been documented between 1984 and 2010, generally north of St Lucia or immediately south of Durban. Usually only a single shark strands, with a maximum of six strandings in a group. On very few occasions the shark has been found alive, and rescue attempts have been met with mixed success.

Whale sharks are highly nomadic and their presence along the KZN coast appears to be a range extension, with animals moving southwards from the tropics. In some parts of the

world they aggregate in response to highly seasonal events such as mass coral or fish spawning. Although whale sharks do feed within KZN waters, their presence has not been closely linked to such events. Few of the sharks are large enough to be mature, so their occurrence on the KZN coast is not related to reproduction.

The whale shark is one of the few sharks protected by the *Marine Living Resources Act* because their habit of swimming slowly at the surface, close inshore, makes them vulnerable to damage from ship/boat strikes and harassment by divers. Most dive operators at Sodwana Bay adhere to a voluntary code of conduct for their clients, the aim of which is to reduce harassment of the sharks.

Majestic whale shark.



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