

Whale sharks shown to favour much of the Western Australian coastline

April 5 2016, by Jo Manning

New research published in the journal *Pacific Conservation Biology* reveals whale sharks are distributed further along the WA coastline than previously understood.

Ningaloo Reef historically has been regarded as THE hotspot for whale sharks in WA, but the innovative research by Murdoch University, ECOCEAN Inc and the University of Queensland has demonstrated that the expansive Western Australian coastline may provide other areas of critical importance for this threatened species.

Research leader Brad Norman from Murdoch's Centre for Fish and Fisheries Research said the team used a combination of innovative satellite-tracking techniques and a community sightings program to unlock some of the mysteries surrounding the threatened species.

"Everyone knows that whale sharks can be found at Ningaloo Reef between April and July every year. As filter feeders, it is where they find an abundance of food. But where they go to and where they come from has been a mystery until now," said Mr Norman.

"For the first time, the satellite tracking shows that they migrate to and from Ningaloo Reef, and it has helped us to identify that Shark Bay is another key area for them along the WA coast. At this stage we believe it's food related and they tend to congregate there late in the year.

"This information has been corroborated by rangers in the Shark Bay

area and by our citizen scientists, who include fishermen who send us reports when they sight the whale sharks."

The study spanned five years (2010-2014), and followed the movements of 13 satellite-tracked whale sharks at Ningaloo Reef. Individuals were recorded swimming north to the Kimberley and south to Perth. The maximum distance travelled by one individual exceeded 3200 km, which is the distance between Adelaide and Darwin. The whale shark swam this distance over the course of 203 days.

Community members also provided more than 8000 sightings information on [whale sharks](#) from as far north as Ashmore Reef and as far south as Albany.

The tracking project continued in 2015 with help from enquiring minds in schools around WA.

With support from the WA Department of Education, pupils from 16 schools across WA co-sponsored the inaugural 'Whale Shark Race Around the World' satellite-tracking program.

The results from this project are currently being analysed and will soon be ready for publication.

"The project helped to engage children in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) learning," added Mr Norman.

"Whale sharks are the ideal flagship species to encourage greater interest from children in these STEM subjects and our marine environment."

More information: The paper is available online:
www.publish.csiro.au/paper/PC15045.htm

Provided by Murdoch University

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