

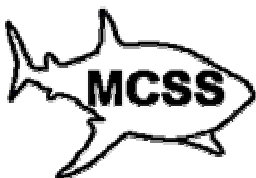
Marine Conservation Society Seychelles

**Workshop on
WHALE SHARK MONITORING IN SEYCHELLES**

28th May 2003

National Institute for Education
Mont Fleuri

Workshop Proceedings



Executive Summary:

The whale shark monitoring programme was started by volunteers in 1996 and under the auspices of the MCSS had been enlarged since 2001 with grant support from the Global Environmental Fund through the World Bank. The early monitoring programme soon gave indications that the whale sharks seen in Seychelles ranged far from Seychelles' waters and it was apparent that there was a need for enhanced data collection to enable the formulation of a national management plan and to allow informed decision making and a regional approach in whale shark conservation and management.

While whale sharks are not hunted for food in Seychelles, they are targeted in other areas of the Indian Ocean and this may be affecting their regional viability. The monitoring of the sharks with both passive and satellite tags was discussed as were current findings regarding their habits and where they go to when they leave Seychelles' waters. Indications from environmental monitoring that may begin to reveal the natural cues that cause the sharks to appear around Seychelles were presented.

A summary of the conservation status of whale sharks under Appendix II of CITES and the CMS was presented. In light of the species migratory behaviour, options for enhanced regional and international cooperation and their relative merits to conserve and manage whale shark populations were presented. The workshop was then briefed on the progress to date in pursuing what has been identified by MCSS/Govt. as the best means of enhancing the international measures to protect the whale shark, namely an agreement under the CMS.

The setting up of a nationwide reporting network was discussed along with the forms for recording sightings and the type of information needed. The need for cross-network feedback was also discussed along with proposals for newsletter and other communication devices.

The importance of continuing the feedback mechanism was discussed and the whale shark monitoring newsletter "Sagren" was launched.

The regular occurrence of whale sharks around Seychelles makes them a potential eco-tourism resource; this was discussed with reference to the problems of predicting their arrival and location and also the likelihood of disrupting the animals' normal behaviour.

Participants put forward views on developing a sustainable whale shark encounter policy which will form the basis for a future workshop. A number of areas were discussed and participants were concerned that care should be taken in any future development of an eco-tourism industry using the whale shark as the primary attraction to ensure it does not adversely affect the sharks.

It was suggested that a time-frame be set up for the implementation of an encounter policy. It was suggested that a workshop should be planned and an outreach programme conducted to get additional views on the subject. Also, existing models should be used as a basis for discussion for the Seychelles whale shark encounter policy

Introduction:

The whale shark monitoring programme was started by volunteers in 1996 and enlarged since 2001 with grant support from the Global Environmental Fund through the World Bank. The early monitoring programme soon gave indications that the whale sharks seen in Seychelles ranged far from Seychelles waters and it was apparent that there was a need for enhanced data collection to enable the formulation of a national management plan and to allow informed decision making and a regional approach in whale shark conservation and management.

Workshop Aims:

1. To advise the public and stakeholders about the monitoring project and advise findings to date.
2. To advise the public and stakeholders of the local, regional and international status of WS conservation legislation.
3. To develop a list of stakeholders and ascertain who is interested in actively assisting in monitoring in some way.
4. To get agreement from stakeholders to set up a monitoring network based on sighting reporting.
5. To inform stakeholders of the possibilities of whale shark eco-tourism and its inherent problems.
6. To get agreement from stakeholders on the development of a Whale Shark Encounter Policy as a basis for a specific workshop.

Workshop outline:

1. Background on the whale shark programme, activities and results to date.
2. Summary of local, regional and international conservation measures.
3. Whale shark monitoring network.
4. Potential for Whale shark eco-tourism.
5. The Next Step: Workshop on a policy for sustainable encounters.

Workshop Outputs:

1. List of people and organizations prepared to participate in a national monitoring campaign
2. List of stakeholders willing to participate in a workshop to develop an encounter policy
3. Basic framework for discussion of the encounter policy

Workshop Discussion Points:

1. Background on the whale shark programme, activities and results to date

The programme was started by volunteers in 1996. In 2001, MCSS attracted grant support from the Global Environmental Fund through The World Bank for the three year period 2001-2003. While whale sharks are not hunted for food in Seychelles, they are targeted in other areas of the Indian Ocean and this may be affecting their regional viability. The monitoring of the sharks with both passive and satellite tags was discussed as were current findings regarding their habits and where they go to when they leave Seychelles waters. Indications from environmental monitoring that may begin to reveal the natural cues that cause the sharks to appear around Seychelles were presented.

2. Summary of local, regional and international conservation measures

Whale sharks are listed in Appendix II of both the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). As of January 2003 the whale shark has received full protection under Seychelles law (The Wild Animals and Birds Protection Act). Since the mid-1990's awareness of the 'at risk status' of the whale shark has also resulted in several other countries and states in the Indian Ocean Region declaring the species protected (Maldives, Philippines, India, South Africa and Western Australia). Options and their relative merits for enhanced regional and international cooperation to conserve and manage whale shark populations was presented in light of the species migratory behaviour - *inter alia* the Nairobi Convention, United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, UN Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks, FAO International Plan of Action for the Conservation and management of Sharks. The workshop was then briefed on the progress to date in pursuing what has been identified by MCSS/Govt. as the best means of enhancing the international measures to protect the whale shark namely an agreement under the CMS.

3. Whale shark monitoring network

The setting up of a nation wide reporting network was discussed along with the forms for recording sightings and the type of information needed. The need for cross-network feedback was also discussed along with proposals for newsletter and other communication devices.

a. Potential Network partners

- Dive Centres (especially outer islands)
- Helicopter Seychelles
- Indian Ocean Tuna
- Institute de Recherche pour le Development
- Island Development Company
- Local Fishermen
- The Marine Charter Association
- Ministry of Environment (Conservation Division)
- Seychelles Fishing Authority
- Visitors

MCSS has been running an informal whale shark monitoring network which has been gathering data since 1996 which incorporates one data set (Helicopter Seychelles) that commenced in 1994. The main network partners to date have been the Helicopter Seychelles, dive centres on Mahe and more recently those on Praslin. The Seychelles Fishing Authority have indicated that they may be able to collect data in

tandem with their project on fish spawning aggregation sites which may prove to be feeding grounds for whale sharks, as is the case in Belize. The other potential network partners identified will be approached individually to seek their participation.

b. Training of Network Members

The need for training in data collection was discussed. This is an important issue as data quality can be severely compromised if information is not gathered correctly. MCSS currently conducts informal training with parties interested in whale shark monitoring. A help sheet has also been developed in conjunction with the data entry form which is distributed to the current network partners. Workshop attendees were also given copies as well as a brief overview of what type of data is required.

c. Publicity

It was suggested that MCSS may be able to further extend the network through publicity. This would target not only residents but also tourists visiting the islands. A list of potential publicity ideas was proposed:

- Articles in Magazines and / or Newspapers
A series of articles could easily be produced for Silhouette, the Air Seychelles in-flight magazine. Content will need to be discussed with the publishers of the magazine. Similarly articles can be written for publication in the Seychelles nation or other local papers.
- Posters & flyers for the public
MCSS has already designed a poster summarising the work that is being done on whale sharks. A second poster on the whale shark itself is being developed for educational purposes.
- Seychelles Tourism Marketing Authority (STMA)
It was proposed that the publicity for the whale shark monitoring network be linked to the PR campaigns of other pertinent agencies e.g. linking the website pages to the STMA website.) This would allow visitors to the MCSS web site to access information on whale sharks as well as make arrangements to visit Seychelles through the STMA link. Or alternatively for visitors to Seychelles to gather more information on what activities they can enjoy while in Seychelles.
- Photo ID contests
It was suggested that this was might be an innovative way for MCSS to build up a whale shark photo Identification database, this could be arranged to coincide with future SUBIOS festivals.
- Promotional video/DVD
This would be a good tool to raise public awareness and could also be used as a means to generate funding through the sale of videos.

d. Regional Network Partners

It was proposed that MCSS look at a regional Network of partners. The data gathered from such a partnership would greatly enhance the understanding of whale shark migrations. Two potential partner groups were identified

- Dive clubs & operators
- Research organisations

Workshop participants were asked to assist should they know of any interested parties.

e. Feed-back:

The importance of continuing the feedback mechanism was discussed. This not only ensures that network partners continue to be updated on MCSS activities and findings but also engenders good relations between the various network partners. Currently feedback is received through liaison with the sighting coordinator/MCSS staff and is possible through the website (www.mcass.sc). The whale shark newsletter "Sagren" was launched at the workshop. Future options include the production of a network report and possible extending the range of the sighting coordinator who is currently only able to visit participants on Mahé.

4. Potential for Whale shark eco-tourism

The regular occurrence of whale sharks around Seychelles makes them a potential eco-tourism resource; this was discussed with reference to the problems of predicting their arrival and location and also the likelihood of disrupting the animals' normal behaviour.

Participants asked what sort of eco-tourism has already been instigated with regards to whale sharks; they were advised that to date only a very limited eco-tourism approach had been undertaken to assist with the funding of the use of boats for monitoring purposes.

5. The Next Step: Workshop on a policy for sustainable encounters

Interested parties were asked to put forward views on developing a sustainable whale shark encounter policy which will form the basis for a future workshop. A number of areas were discussed and the following points noted:

a. Whale sharks as an Eco-tourism Resource:

Care should be taken in any future development of an eco-tourism industry using the whale shark as the primary attraction to ensure it does not adversely affect the sharks, ie the precautionary approach.

- The scale of the industry will need to be determined i.e. official and un-official whale shark encounter activities
- A comparison with whale watching activities could be conducted
- There is a need to have a valid monitoring programme to evaluate the effects of encounters, i.e. a review mechanism
- A representative of the Ministry of Tourism enquired as to whether comments had been submitted to the Ministry regarding the eco-tourism policy draft document and recommended that comments along this line be submitted

b. Implementation of the Encounter Policy

- It was suggested that a time-frame be set up for the implementation of an encounter policy. A workshop should be planned and an outreach programme conducted to get additional views on the subject
- Existing models should be used as a basis for discussion for the Seychelles whale shark encounter policy

c. Local support

- It was felt that all relevant Ministries should be encouraged to support and promote stakeholder input and attendance at the suggested workshop so that the policy developed had broad stakeholder approval.

Workshop Outputs:

1. List of people and organizations prepared to participate in a national monitoring campaign

Workshop participants proposed a number of organizations which could potentially assist in data collection for the whale shark monitoring Network. Most if these organisations are already involve in an informal capacity. This will need to be strengthened through a more personal approach and feedback mechanism. Those not already participating will be approached by MCSS to gauge their interest in forming part of the network

- Dive Centres (especially outer islands)
- Helicopter Seychelles
- Indian Ocean Tuna
- Institute de Reserche pour le Development
- Island Development Company
- Local Fishermen
- The Marine Charter Association
- Ministry of Environment (Conservation Division)
- Seychelles Fishing Authority
- Visitors

2. List of stakeholders willing to participate in a workshop to develop an encounter policy

All contact details for the organizations and individuals who attended the first workshop were recorded. In addition MCSS has a list of stakeholders that had been identified in house, prior to the workshop but where unable to attend.

3. Basic framework for discussion of the encounter policy

This was discussed during the workshop and a number of valid points were raised. These are detailed in section 5 of this report under the following headings:

- a. Whale sharks as an Eco-tourism Resource
- b. Implementation of the Encounter Policy
- c. Local support