

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release



Global first: wild whale shark ultrasound in Galapagos

Despite being the largest fish in the world, we still have a lot to learn about the biology of the whale shark which is classed as endangered by the IUCN Red List. However, thanks to the Galapagos Whale Shark Project in partnership with Galapagos Conservation Trust, the Galapagos National Park, University of San Francisco de Quito, Massey University and Okinawa Churahima Foundation, a huge step forward has been taken, with the first ever whale shark ultrasound carried out in the wild!



Whale shark sampling © David Acuña

The Galapagos Whale Shark Project, which is partly funded by Galapagos Conservation Trust, has been working since 2011 to improve the scientific understanding of whale sharks in the Galapagos Islands, and to improve their protection within Galapagos and the wider Eastern Tropical Pacific region. The population visiting the Galapagos Islands seem to be unique in that the majority of individuals appear to be pregnant females. Up until now, however, this has never been proven.

Whale sharks in Galapagos congregate around Darwin and Wolf islands in the north of the Galapagos Marine Reserve so this is where the multi-institutional team concentrated their efforts. They managed to get ultrasounds from three females, and take blood samples from a mature male and a mature female. The analysis of the females' blood samples and ultrasounds will confirm, finally, whether these large females that visit Galapagos are indeed pregnant.

Alex Hearn, one of the project leaders of the Galapagos Whale Shark Project commented, *“Almost nothing is known about the reproductive ecology of whale sharks. No pupping grounds have ever been identified, and the only pregnant female ever to have been analysed, found in Asia, carried over 300 pups, all at different stages of development. For years, we have suspected that the females in Galapagos are pregnant, and that they may give birth over an extended period of time and spatial area, out in the ocean. However, as yet, all this has been speculation. At last, with the successful testing of ultrasound scans and blood extraction in the wild, we have the tools to really examine this idea.”*

If the females are proved to be pregnant, this research combined with ongoing tracking of their migration routes, could have huge implications for the future management of these endangered creatures, which are hunted globally for their meat and fins.

To find out how to help protect whale sharks in the Galapagos Islands, please visit galapagosconservation.org.uk

ENDS

Notes to editors:

- Whale sharks had their status changed from vulnerable to endangered in 2016. They typically visit the northern Galapagos islands of Wolf and Darwin between June and December. Unlike aggregations in the Indian Ocean, which are largely made up of small immature males, the majority of sharks sighted in the Galapagos Marine Reserve are large mature females, a high proportion of which (over 90%) appear to be pregnant. There is still much to learn about the species including where they give birth.
- Since 2011, the **Galapagos Whale Shark Project** has been increasing our scientific knowledge of whale sharks in the Galapagos Islands by satellite tagging and tracking individuals. Their achievements so far have included successfully tracking the migration routes from the Galapagos Islands to the continental shelf off mainland Ecuador and northern Peru, and using new technology such as drones to try to understand more about these elusive creatures. In addition, they undertake education and outreach activities on the Islands and on mainland South America to increase awareness about the vulnerability of the species.
- The **Galapagos Conservation Trust** (GCT) is the only UK charity to focus exclusively on the conservation and sustainability of the Galapagos Islands. Established in 1995 at the Royal Society, GCT raises funding and awareness for projects in Galapagos, which focus on science, conservation, education and sustainability.
- This research could not have been carried out without support from the Georgia Aquarium, Marine Megafauna Foundation, and the Blake, Kimberly and George Rapier Charitable Trust.
- Images available on request

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