

# PRESS RELEASE

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## Is there a baby on board? First ultrasound images from wild whale sharks released

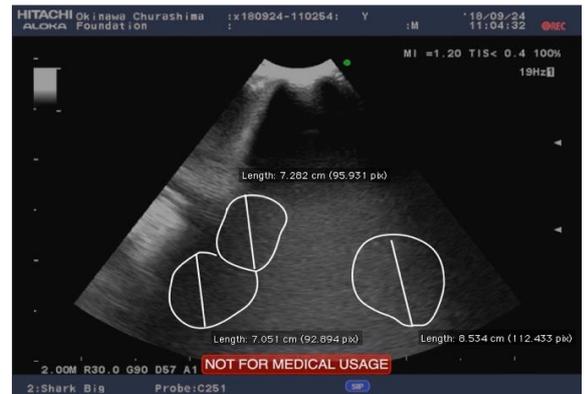
As shown on the BBC's *Blue Planet II* in 2017, we still don't know where the largest fish in the world, the endangered whale shark, goes to give birth. This year the Galapagos Whale Shark Project, supported by Galapagos Conservation Trust, and in partnership with the Galapagos National Park, University of San Francisco de Quito, Marine Megafauna Foundation and the Okinawa Churashima Foundation, reached a major milestone in whale shark reproductive research, by carrying out 21 ultrasounds on 16 wild female whale sharks and successfully getting images!



The Galapagos Whale Shark Project (GWSP), funded by Galapagos Conservation Trust (GCT), 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. 99% of the whale sharks visiting Darwin and Wolf islands, in the north of the Galapagos Marine Reserve, are adult females and the majority have had enlarged abdomens, widely thought to be suggestive of pregnancy.

In 2017, the GWSP undertook the first ever ultrasound on a wild whale shark, but they failed to get images of internal organs or structures. This year, after alterations to the equipment, they successfully obtained images of ovaries with follicles – the first time this has been done on wild whale sharks!

**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. The only pregnant female ever to have been analysed, found in Asia, carried over 300 pups, all at different stages of development. Many researchers in the whale shark community believe that the distended abdomens are a clear indication of pregnancy, and for years, we have suspected that the females in Galapagos are pregnant. While this may indeed be the case, they also appear to be coy - they are not ready to give up their secrets quite yet. Thanks to the ultrasounds, we have been able to identify follicles in their ovaries but, as yet, we have not identified clear evidence of developing embryos. The ultrasound must penetrate up to 25 cm of skin and muscles, so it is a challenge to obtain clear images, but we are getting closer to settling this question."*



**Sharon Johnson, chief executive for GCT, said,** *"The Galapagos Marine Reserve is one of the most biologically diverse marine protected areas in the world, and one of the few places left on Earth with a high abundance of endangered shark species, including whale sharks. These sharks face major threats including overfishing and pollution, and therefore it is critical for us to understand as much about them as we can in order to conserve them. Galapagos Conservation Trust is proud to be supporting the Galapagos Whale Shark Project to ensure whale sharks are protected for generations to come."*

These results, along with blood and tissue samples, and the successful deployment of 12 satellite tags to track whale shark migration, are helping to build up a picture of whale shark biology. Despite not finding evidence of embryos, this is a huge milestone in discovering how, where and when whale sharks are giving birth. It is also another step in the right direction to conserving these endangered gentle giants, which are hunted globally for their meat and fins.

To find out more about the Galapagos Whale Shark Project, please visit [galapagosconservation.org.uk/whale-shark-monitoring](https://galapagosconservation.org.uk/whale-shark-monitoring)

## 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. [www.galapagoswhaleshark.org](http://www.galapagoswhaleshark.org)
- **Galapagos Conservation Trust (GCT)** is the only UK charity focussed solely on the conservation of one of the most unique and ecologically important, but vulnerable, areas in the world, the Galapagos Islands. With over 20 years of experience, we partner with Ecuadorian authorities, NGOs, local communities and leading researchers to support impactful Science & Conservation programmes and deliver community outreach across the Archipelago through our Education & Sustainability programme. We have been supporting the Galapagos Whale Shark Project since 2011. [galapagosconservation.org.uk](http://galapagosconservation.org.uk)
- This research was carried out by the Galapagos Whale Shark Project, the Galapagos National Park Directorate, the Marine Megafauna Foundation, Universidad San Francisco de Quito and the Okinawa Churashima Foundation. It was supported by Galapagos Conservation Trust and Planeterra.

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