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Lack of management intervention leads to increased injuries on endangered whale sharks in Oslob, Cebu, Philippines

Oslob Cebu, 8 October 2020. [A new study](#) published by LAMAVE in the journal Aquatic Conservation, Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems this week, present the results of some of the work conducted since 2012 to assess the impacts of tourism activities on individual whale sharks in Oslob, Cebu. The study found that individual whale sharks observed in barangay Tan-Awan, where the *butanding* are hand-fed daily to enable the tourism interactions, show a significantly higher number of injury, and scars than whale sharks in other non-provisioned (non-fed) tourism sites in Australia, Mozambique and the Seychelles. The study highlights the increased risk for these sharks that regularly visit the provisioning site in Oslob, and underline the urgent need to implement proper management interventions to guarantee the tourism activities do not harm these endangered animals.



Image 1: A highly resident whale shark photographed in the tourism interaction area of Brgy Tan-Awan with a fresh laceration caused by a small boat propeller. Credit: ©Steve De Neef|LAMAVE

The study presents results from photographic images of 152 individual whale sharks collected by the researchers from Large Marine Vertebrates Research Institute Philippines over a period of 34

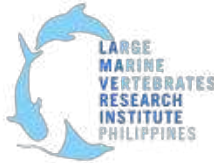
months (March 2012 – January 2015) in Oslob, Cebu. The team used photo-identification (photo-ID) to monitor individual whale sharks' presence and movement and gathered data on the presence, size, type and location of scars on the whole body of these gigantic animals as well as the accumulation of these scars over time. These scarring patterns of whale sharks in Oslob were compared with quantitative studies from Ningaloo in Australia, the Seychelles and Mozambique, other known global aggregations where feeding the whale shark is prohibited and enforced.

The study found that whale sharks in Oslob were significantly more scarred than any other studied population: 95% of all whale sharks in Oslob had scars on their body, with abrasion being the most common type of scar. Most of the scars were categorised as nicks and abrasions and were most likely due to the close contact of ropes, small boats at the provisioning site. Lacerations, which fall into the major category, were observed on 28% of individuals, which is significantly higher than in Ningaloo and Mozambique. These were caused by boat propellers of different sizes and could be facilitated both from the habituation to boats caused by the practice of hand-feeding the whale sharks, as well as the increased traffic of motorized vessels in the surroundings of the provisioning area.

Whale sharks that were observed more frequently in the interaction area showed a significantly higher rate of scarring compared to individual sharks that were seen less frequently in the area; these regular visitors to Oslob accumulated scars over the observation period and suggest a direct causal link between the exposure to the tourism activities in Barangay Tan-Awan and scarring rates. Scars and wounds, even when non-lethal, may pose a serious risk to these endangered species, increasing the physiological stress of the animals, facilitating the contraction of diseases carried by pathogens like virus and bacteria and decreasing overall the health of the affected individuals.



Image 2: Scars on the head and mouth of a whale shark in Oslob, Cebu at different stages of inflammation and tissue reaction. These scars are caused by continuous contact and rubbing against hard surfaces like outriggers and boat hulls, and are similar to what observed in whale shark kept in captivity in aquaria. Credit: ©LAMAVE

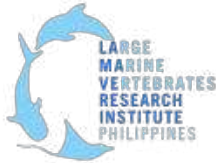


Lead author Luke Penketh remarks *"this study presents evidence of the negative physical impacts of the tourism activity on the whale sharks in Oslob. I have seen myself the wounds on these endangered and enigmatic animals; injuries which highlight the need for an urgent change in Oslob."*

Management solutions to reduce the physical impact of tourism on whale sharks

The high incidence of injuries in the whale sharks provisioned in Oslob is a national concern and there is an urgent need to improve management practices to protect this endangered species. The whale shark is protected by Republic Act No. 9147 'Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act.' whereby it is illegal to maltreat and/or inflict injuries on threatened wildlife, and this is further reinforced by the DOT-DA-DILG-DENR Joint Memorandum Circular no.01 series of 2020 (Sect. 8) where it prohibits acts in dedicated interactions sites that would hinder an animals' health, including injury and distress. The Philippines is a signatory country to the UNEP Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), where the signatories agree and recommend the strict regulation, monitoring and enforcement of the whale shark tourism interaction activities to ensure its sustainable management and conservation value as highlighted in the Concerted Action for the Whale Shark (UNEP/CMS/Concerted Action 12.7, 2017).

The results highlighted in this study, when paired with the existing knowledge on the migratory nature of this species and connectivity between the archipelago, where individual whale sharks identified in Oslob have been re-sighted in Donsol (Sorsogon Region V) Sogod bay (Southern Leyte Region VIII), Tubbataba Reef Natural Park (Palawan Region VIa), Misamis Oriental (Region 10) and nationally connected further abroad to Malaysia, Indonesia and Taiwan, call the National Department of Tourism, Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the Department of Agriculture - in collaboration with the Department of Interior and Local Government to urgently intervene to ensure the sustainable management the tourism activities in the municipality of Oslob, as well as in other Regions, to ensure the long term balance between the socio-economic benefit of the local communities, the conservation of the marine environment and preservation of endangered protected species like the whale sharks.



Notes to Editors:

The study by Luke Penketh et al., titled '**Scarring patterns of whale sharks *Rhincodon typus* at a provisioning site in the Philippines**' is published in the journal Aquatic Conservation, Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems on 4 October 2020 and is available here: <https://doi.org/10.1002/aqc.3437>

If you would like more information or to arrange an interview please contact Sally Snow, email: s.snow@lamave.org +639772055794. Photos are available upon request.

Large Marine Vertebrates Research Institute Philippines (LAMAVE) is the largest independent non-profit non-governmental organization dedicated to the conservation of marine megafauna and their habitats in the Philippines. LAMAVE strives for conservation through scientific research, policy and education. For more information visit: www.lamave.org | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Twitter](#).