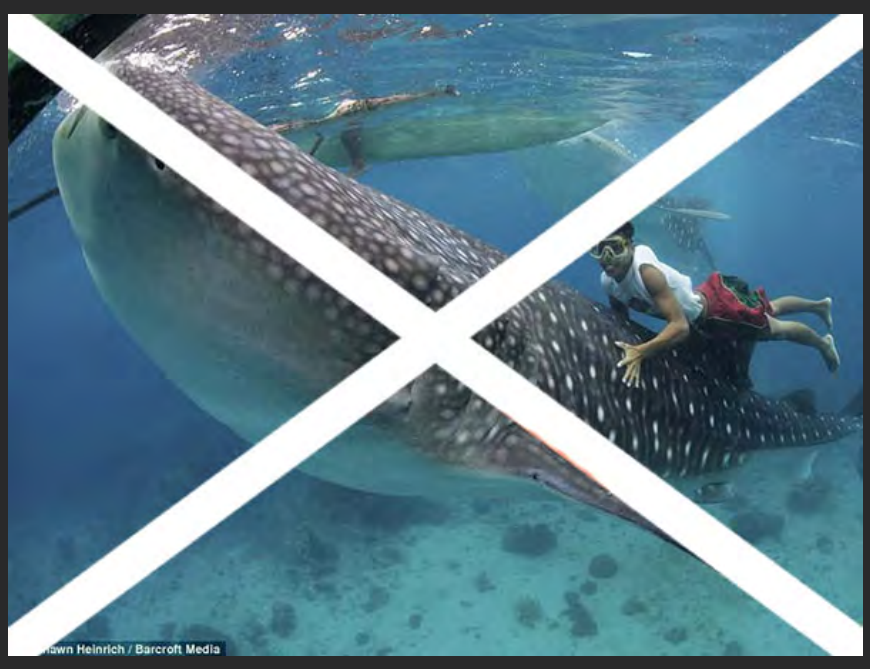

5 reasons not to swim with whale sharks in Oslob

The whale shark interaction of Oslob has been controversial since it started. Many people wrongly believe that there are no negative impacts to the whale shark interaction, and may even say that it helps in their conservation! Find out more about why you should not support this activity.

1. Contact & interaction

Many people don't follow whale shark interaction code of conduct. Participants who breach the guidelines given during briefings are not penalized.

The whale shark is a protected species in the Philippines and Under Republic Act 9147, an Act for the conservation and protection of wildlife resources and habitats in the Philippines, it is illegal to harass them.

Compliance to interaction regulations was monitored by LAMAVE for 3,849 minutes. Surveys lasted for 20 minutes or until the shark moved out of sight. Over the course of the study, they recorded 1823 'active touches' of the whale sharks. That equates to 29 touches per hour.

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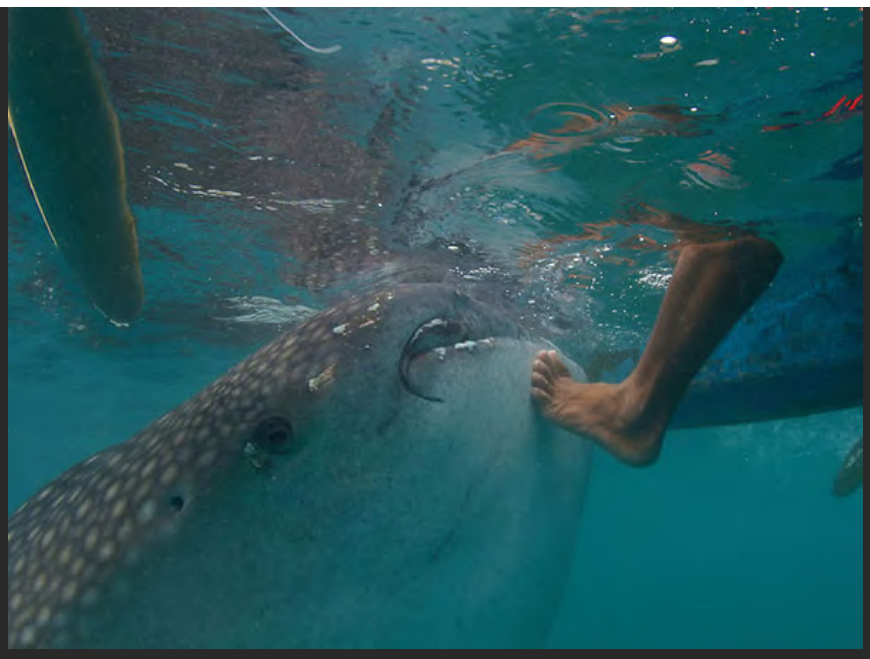


In 89% of the events the contact is initiated by one of the feeders that touches the mouth of the shark, or places his foot in between the shark and the hull of the boat. This is usually to prevent the shark from bumping the boat, and pushing into it whilst it is getting fed (Fig. 38). The feeders have also been observed to occasionally stroke the sharks and push them away in an attempt to discourage the shark from feeding because they want to conserve the food for the next group of guests / next day.

2. Behaviour modification & injuries

The feeding in Oslob is teaching whale sharks that boats and humans mean food. Oslob whale sharks are now observed to actively approach boats instead of avoiding them.

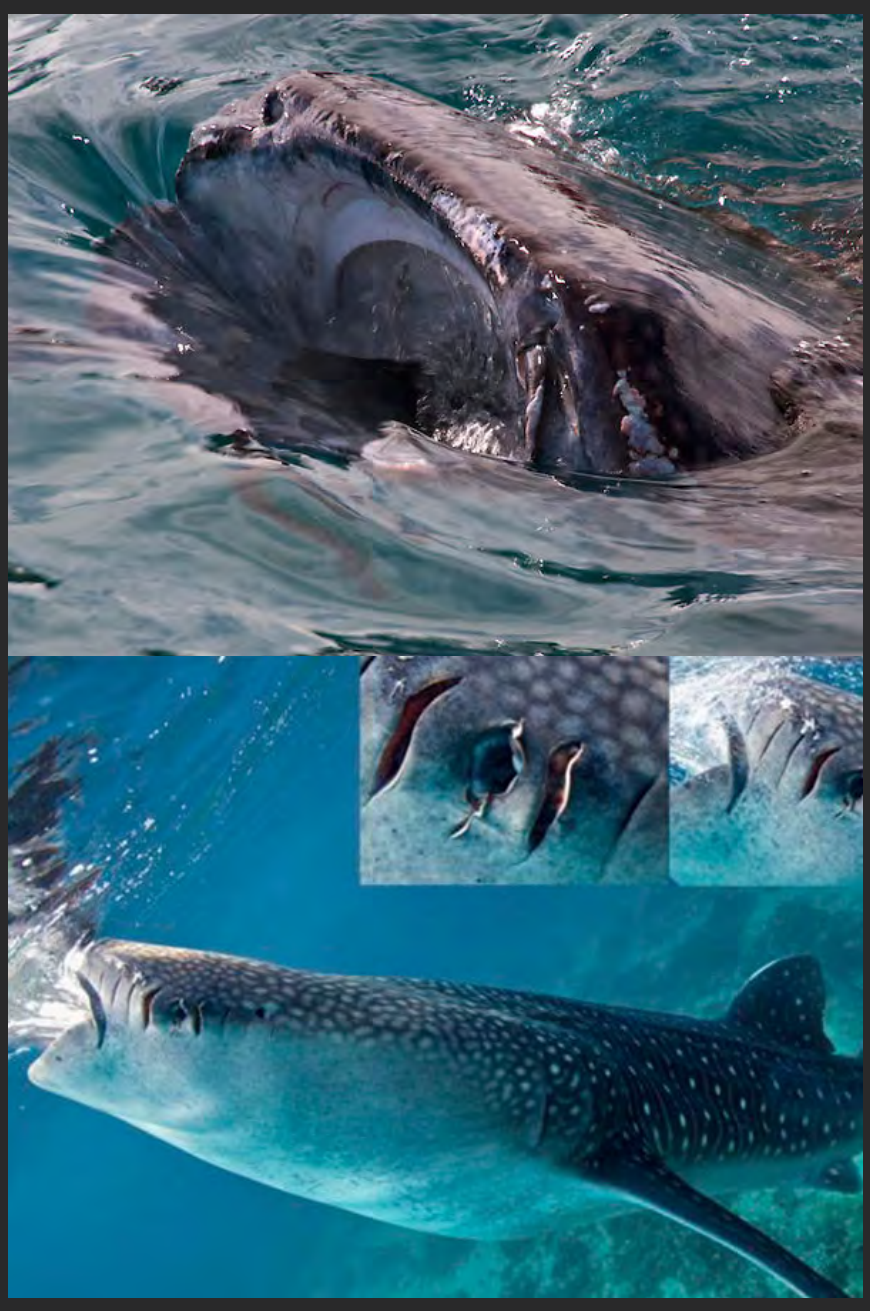
This behavioural modification might also have inherent risks for whale sharks who travel outside of protected waters and wrongly approach shark fishing boats, as whale sharks are normally a highly migratory species.

So what is so bad about contact and interaction with humans and boats?

Sharks are not commonly exposed to the types of bacteria that

humans can have on their skin and are vulnerable to infection from too much contact.

Excessive friction from rubbing against the side of feeder boats is the cause of many injuries to whale sharks. These lesions that appear mostly white and have a spongy consistency, are the result of the reaction of the skin around the mouth to repeated abrasion. They can also be red and inflamed.

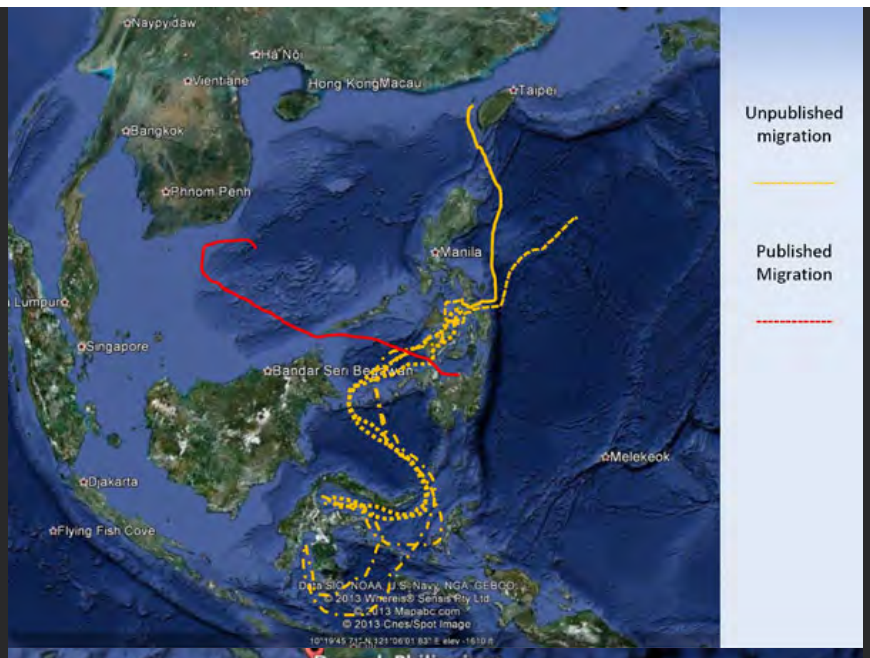


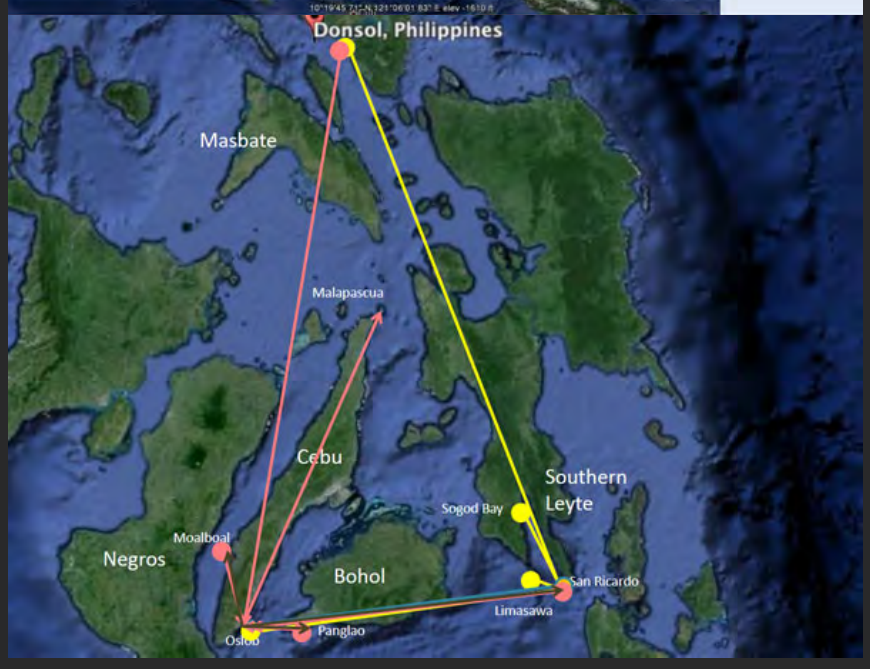
None of the new sharks that arrive has any sign of these scars and it takes less than a week of feeding from boats to develop them. The same is true for the white scars on the leading edge of the first dorsal fin, where the abrasion is due to the contact with the hull and outrigger of the paddleboats.

While propeller boats are not allowed to operate in the interaction zone in Oslob, whale sharks are not really able to tell the difference and might attempt to approach a boat under engine. This had harmful consequences for whale shark, Fermin, in 2012, who sustained multiple propeller cuts to his face and eye.

3. Changes to migration

Whale sharks are a highly-migratory species and normally follow the path of nutrient-rich seasonal aggregations of plankton. Whale sharks are known to migrate great distances, across various countries and jurisdictions. A tagged whale shark from the Philippines was found in Taiwan!





The natural season for whale sharks in Oslob lasts for only 60 days. However, as fishermen import food from other regions to feed the whale sharks, they are now staying in Oslob for much longer instead of moving on to other regions. As of 2013, the longest recorded stay for a whale shark in Oslob was Mr. Bean, who had stayed for 392 days!

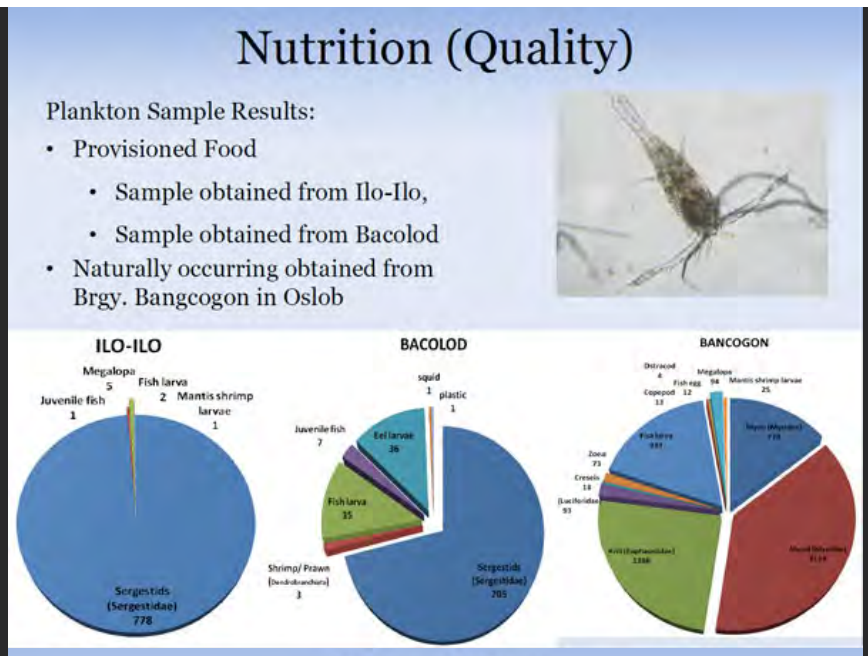
This change in migratory patterns could affect the future breeding prospects of the whale sharks as they are prevented from fulfilling their biological purpose. Little is known about whale shark reproduction and any negative effect to their breeding cycle could have very serious circumstances for the survival of the species.

4. Poor nutrition

Aside from breeding, the lack of migration also poses another problem – instead of moving with the nutritious blooms of plankton, the whale sharks are now also eating less natural food that is not complete for their nutritional needs.

The nutrition of whale sharks in Oslob is also extremely questionable. The natural plankton present in Oslob consists of a variety of organisms including 12 different types of plankton. When this naturally occurring food runs out, replacement feed is imported from neighbouring islands such as Ilo-Ilo and Bacolod, where the feed can only have about 5 different types of plankton.

There are many problems with this, including: loss of nutritional value due to storage and transportation (some of the feed can come from 400km away), contamination of the feed, and low variety due to fishing methods. Just imagine if you only ate only take-away French fries everyday instead of a varied diet!



The whale sharks also spend a lot of time “chasing” the feeding boats and not necessarily receiving enough nutrition as they would if feeding in a natural high-plankton environment. The whale sharks waste a lot of energy as the intention of the feeders are to lead the shark and not to actually feed it properly.

5. You can see them in the wild

Last but not least, one of the best reasons to avoid the “whale shark circus” of Oslob, is that you can see whale sharks in the wild in other parts of the Philippines!

There are plenty of places in the Philippines where whale sharks appear, and being migratory, they often pass by our coastline. The images below were taken by our divers. An encounter with a whale shark in the wild is full of surprise, mystery, adrenalin and delight. Imagine seeing a lion in a cage at the zoo, and compare that to seeing a lion stalking its prey on a national park safari in Africa. The difference and quality of the experience is huge!

As the old adage goes, if you love them, set them free!

Background to OSLOB

Oslob is a small municipality in the southern tip of Cebu Island, Philippines. It encompasses 21 barangays (villages), including Tan-awan, where the whale shark feeding occurs. Aside from Cebu, you can often embark on the whale shark tours from Dumaguete and Bohol, hence many tourists are not actually sure where the feeding and interaction takes place.

In the 1980s, whale shark hunting was prevalent in the Philippines and researchers recorded at least 627 individuals killed over seven years in the Bohol Sea. Luckily for the whale sharks, the Philippines become one of the first countries in the world to protect them in 1998, by prohibiting the capture, sale, transport or export of whale sharks – whether dead or alive – as well as the wounding or killing of whale sharks.

Fishermen using sergestid shrimps (locally known as uyap) as bait would find whale sharks approaching their hook and lines to try and feed of the bait. The fishermen tried various methods, including throwing rocks, to try and stop the disruption. In Tan-awan, the fishermen discovered that they could lead the whale sharks away from fishing boats by luring them with small amounts of uyap.

A dive centre owner discovered this and paid the fishermen to lure the whale sharks towards his guests instead of away. The news spread by word of mouth and many people started visiting Oslob to see the whale sharks. In December 2011, the Daily Mail newspaper from the UK featured an article with photographs of a man riding a whale shark, and tourism in the small village exploded.

In the beginning, there were no regulations in place for the feeding and the conditions were chaotic and dangerous (for both man and shark). Since then, there have been many new regulations made with

regards to the interaction, including a standard briefing as well as a new schedule of fees and visitor guidelines.

Physalus / LAMAVE

Physalus is a non-profit organization founded in Italy, operating primarily for the protection of the environment through marine conservation initiatives. In 2010, Physalus started the Large Marine Vertebrates Project Philippines (LAMAVE) to conduct scientific research and raise environmental awareness in collaboration with government agencies, non-government organizations, universities and the private sector.

LAMAVE has a research base in Oslob that studies the potential impacts of the interaction tourism on the sharks. They also maintain a photographic identification database of whale sharks throughout the Visayas to learn more about their distribution, population and migration patterns.

Through their research and recommendations, LAMAVE hopes to aid in developing a sustainable and well-guided management plan for whale shark eco-tourism in the Philippines. Below are the concerns regarding the feeding and interaction, based on their research.

Photos courtesy of Steve de Neef and Physalus / LAMAVE, unless otherwise credited.

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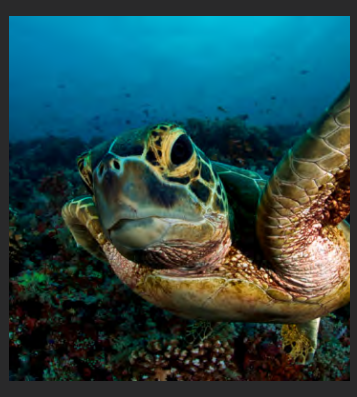

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