

Short Communication:

Occurrence of Whale Sharks in Coastal Waters in the Indian Ocean: An Interesting Coincidence

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Abstract

KEY WORDS: WHALE SHARKS; INDIAN OCEAN

Whale shark is the world's largest growing fish. In Sri Lanka a whale shark was recorded from Hendala, on 29th March 1999. A similar occurrence has been also recorded from Mumbai, India on 15 March 1999. The whale shark recorded in India was a male, whereas the one recorded in Sri Lanka was a female. Both were entangled in gillnets operated in shallow coastal waters off two thickly populated cities, Mumbai and Colombo. Research Divers also have sighted another whale shark closer to Colombo on 27th March 1999, indicating the month of March to be an active period for whale – sharks as also they are moving towards shallow water during this month.

Discussion

The whale - shark, *Rhincodon typus*, Smith 1828, is the largest growing fish of the world. According to literature, it can grow upto 12 m or even more. It prefers the open oceanic waters but mostly lives close to the coast. It is a harmless and an epipelagic filter feeder. It usually has a solitary life but schools have also been recorded. It feeds on plankton and also on small crustaceans, squids and schooling fishes like anchovies, sardines etc (Richmond, 1997). In Sri Lanka this species is seldomly recorded and generally do not use for consumption.

Table I: Information on the 03 whale sharks recorded during March 1999

		Whale shark Recorded from India	Whale shark Recorded from Sri Lanka.	Whale shark sighting recorded from Sri Lanka.
i.	Location	Off Mumbai	Off Colombo	Off Panadura
ii.	Date of sighting	15.03.99	29.03.99	27.03.99
iii.	Entangled/sighted	Entangled to a Gillnet	Entangled to a Gillnet	Sighted by divers
iv.	Depth (m)	16	30	08
v.	Sex	Male	Female	Not known
vi.	Total length(m)	8.66	6.06	4.00 (Appox.)
vii.	Head length(m)	2.03	1.75	-
viii.	Trunk length(m)	3.05	-	-
ix.	Tail length(m)	3.58	3.00	-
x.	Head width(m)	2.24	-	-
xi.	1 st dorsal fin length(m)	1.04	-	-
xii.	1 st dorsal fin height(m)	0.81	-	-
xiii.	2 nd dorsal fin length(m)	0.48	-	-
xiv.	2 nd dorsal fin height(m)	0.36	-	-
xv.	Pectoral fin height(m)	1.45	-	-
xvi.	Approximate weight(tons)	8.0	6.0	-

In India, this species is exploited mainly in Gujarat coast by harpoon fisheries. It is important to note that this shark is listed on the IUCN Red List of threatened animals. According to literature this animal shows seasonal migrations along coasts and concentrate in inshore tropical regions during certain parts of the year. Results indicate that this period could be from February through March to April, although still it is not yet confirmed.

The whale shark sighted by NARA Research Diving team was approximately 4 m in total length. The animal was sighted underwater and approached the divers to a distance of 1 to 1.5 meters and cruised around the divers about 3 to 4 times (Rajasuriya, Personnel communication, 1999)

Three whale sharks recorded almost within the same time (During March 1999) in India (Anonymous, 1999) and in Sri Lanka is an interesting coincidence. Some morphometric measurements and other related information of the three animals are listed in Table I.

Acknowledgements

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