

**Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications**  
**Legislation Committee**  
Answers to questions on notice  
**Environment portfolio**

**Question No:** 45  
**Hearing:** Supplementary Budget Estimates  
**Outcome:** Outcome 1  
**Programme:** Wildlife Heritage and Marine Division  
**Topic:** WHALE SHARK  
**Hansard Page:** 48  
**Question Date:** 20 October 2014  
**Question Type:** Spoken

**Senator Whish-Wilson asked:**

**Senator WHISH-WILSON:** Just out of interest, although the name 'whale shark' has the word 'whale' in it, they are probably not classified as whales, but has the Department done any work on whale sharks and whale shark conservation in north-west Australia?

**Mr Thompson:** I am not aware of any, but that does not mean it has not happened. I will have to take that on notice.

**Senator WHISH-WILSON:** What other departments should I ask that question to? Would it be—

**Mr Thompson:** This is probably the right department to ask. It would then be a matter of whether this had emerged or biocatch had emerged as an issue in any Commonwealth fisheries, which could be a matter for Agriculture. But I am not aware that biocatch is such an issue for whale sharks.

**Senator WHISH-WILSON:** No, I was more interested in the migratory nature of the sharks, because I have just come back from Indonesia, where unfortunately one was caught and sold at the fish market when I was there, and I just wanted to know if we have been doing any study or research in that area.

**Mr Thompson:** I am not aware of any. Are they CITES listed? They may be CITES listed, in which case we could pick this up in one of the later sessions, if you like.

**Answer:**

***National and International conservation measures***

- The whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*) is the world's largest shark.
- The whale shark was listed as a vulnerable species under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* in 2001, and a national recovery plan for the species was put in place in 2005.
- Whale sharks are also afforded international protection through listing on Appendix II of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS) and Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.
- A review was recently undertaken of the whale shark recovery plan. The review found that the major ongoing threat to whale sharks was from intentional and unintentional capture of whale sharks in international waters through fishing operations. The review also found that no significant threats to whale sharks occurred within Australian waters and that tourist related activities, primarily at Ningaloo Reef, are well managed.

### ***Whale shark distribution and migration***

- Whale sharks have a broad distribution in tropical and warm temperate seas. In Australian waters, they are known to aggregate at Ningaloo Reef, Western Australia and in the Coral Sea, Queensland.
- The whale shark is a highly migratory and only visits Australian waters seasonally. Uncertainties remain in the understanding of the biology, migration patterns and life cycles of new and returning whale sharks in Australian waters. There is limited understanding of where individuals come from and where they go to after spending time in Australian waters.

### ***Research on whale sharks***

- The Australian Government has supported a project investigating whale shark numbers and movement in the north-west of Australia, including a component developing population monitoring protocols for whale sharks in an effort to determine best practice for the monitoring of the aggregation at Ningaloo Reef.
- Australian Government support was also made available through the National Heritage Trust for assessing ecological knowledge of whale sharks in eastern Indonesia. A part of this research explored the possibility of partnering with local fishermen on Timor and Rote Islands to undertake whale shark research and conservation. This research found that while this was possible, balancing efforts with subsistence fishing would be required.

### ***International cooperation (in particular with Indonesia) on whale shark conservation***

- The Australian Government was instrumental in the adoption of new measures on whale shark conservation in the operational rules of the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission and the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission. Indonesia is also a member of these commissions.
- Australia became a signatory to the CMS Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation of Migratory Sharks (Sharks MoU) in February 2011. This affords greater collaboration between member nations on the conservation of a number of listed shark species, including the whale shark. Indonesia is not a signatory to the CMS Sharks MoU.