

THE BLACKTIP REEF SHARK: FIRST EVER UNDERWATER ENCOUNTER IN KUWAIT

Dareen Almojil¹, Nancy Papathanasopoulou²

¹Kuwait Environmental Research and Awareness Centre (KERA), P.O Box 14518, zip code 72856, dareenalmojil@gmail.com

² Kuwait Turtle Conservation Project, P.O. Box 214383 Dubai, UAE. nancyktcp@gmail.com

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Wrapping up its works in August 2011 and sponsored by TOTAL Foundation and TOTAL Kuwait, the Kuwait Turtle Conservation Project (KTCP) was on the islands of Qaru and Umm Al-Maradim for three years, monitoring sea turtle populations along with their nesting and hatching habitats in Kuwait. Both islands sport vibrant coral reef areas and Qaru especially boasts at least 127 species of fish, as well as crustaceans, molluscs and even some passing birds such as kestrels (*Falco* sp.), cormorants (*Phalacrocorax* sp), hoopoes (*Upupa epops*), herons, terns and waders. Predators such as sharks had not been recorded previously. However, in June 2011 KTCP researchers photographed a blacktip reef shark (*Carcharinus melanopterus*) for the first time ever (Fig 1), not only in Qaru, but also in Kuwait. It measured around 1.5 meters, was initially briefly seen on the 18th of June in 1.5m of water depth vanishing into deeper waters almost as fast as it had appeared. It was next seen feeding for several minutes and photographed on the 19th of June. It was seen again on the 21st, feeding on sind halfbeak needlefish (*Hyporhamphus sindensis*) (Fig 2).

In Gulf waters the blacktip reef shark is common along Oman's coastline, especially in shallow inshore coral reef areas and also inhabits the shores of Khor Fakkan and Abu Dhabi waters in the United Arab Emirates. It has a small home range area, which it inhabits for several years and is very shy, avoiding divers where possible. Its distinctive traits are the prominent black tips to the fins and the creamy grey gradient around its first dorsal fin. Its maximum recorded length was 2 meters. A light lateral streak along its sides is another characteristic trait of this majestic fish. As it likes to feed on reef fish and cephalopods (Fig 3), it is estimated that it may have been attracted by the large numbers of cuttlefish and needlefish in the Qaru island area.

In Kuwait, there is not a single conservation study aiming to protect sharks, possibly because of their low economic value to the country. However, studies have shown conserving top predators has a direct effect on the abundance of other economically important fish, including groupers and emperors. Thus understanding and conserving these vital members of the ecosystem is crucial when seeking to ensure sustainability of local, economically important fish stocks.

In general, knowledge of elasmobranchs' spatial distribution in the Arabian Gulf is limited to records from the 1940s and 1980s. Reports may be unreliable due to identification difficulties among species of Carcharhinidae. The most recent contribution to the list of regional Shark species diversity was produced in 2010 by Moore et al. showing no records of *C. melanopterus*.

This June 2011 encounter in Qaru is of great value not only because it confirms the presence of *C.*

Fig 1. Blacktip reef shark near Qaru island (KTCP).



Fig 2. Sind halfbeak needlefish (KTCP).

melanopterus in Kuwait, but also because it reflects possible signs of improvement in the health of the local coral reef ecosystem. Since sharks are top predators, they detect weak individuals or species and prey on them. They therefore ensure a healthy, strong gene pool in the fish population as well as stronger, more resistant species over time. This process is vital to ensure healthy control of biodiversity, high standard ecosystem health and life sustainability.



Fig 3. Cuttlefish which are another prey species for the blacktip reef shark (KTCP).

Sharks are close to being lost from our seas and the shark fin trade especially has inflicted a tremendous decline on certain populations. Yet, their conservation is crucial, not only because they have inhabited the earth 250 million years before dinosaurs and because of the direct dependency of healthy fish stocks on them but also because they are the oldest animals known to have antibodies and are believed to be the hope for the production of a new generation of medicine in the future that might provide a solution for inhibiting the growth of tumour cells.

Unfortunately, shark encounters have been extremely rare in Kuwait since the 1980s, mostly due to overfishing and habitat destruction. In the past, Kuwaiti people relied on the sea as their main source of food, employment and income. Historically, understanding and care were given in order to ensure not only sustainability of the fishermen's income but also the future of their children's resources. Today, however, with the introduction of the oil industry as the country's main source of income, the importance of sustainably managing marine resources is not a priority anymore. The current attitude is "fish it all before someone else does", when it should probably be "conserve sustainably and securing future the generation's food supply.