

DIVING FOR A CAUSE: TURNING DIVERS AND THE SEA FARING COMMUNITY INTO 'CITIZEN SCIENTISTS'

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Sharkwatch Arabia is a research and conservation initiative that aims to collect information on whale sharks in the region. The work will also form the basis of a post-graduate study being run through the Heriot-Watt University based in the UK and Dubai and supported by the Sultan Qaboos University, Oman.

This is the first true community based research project in the region that aims to utilize the regional diving and sea faring community to collect information on sightings and behaviour of whale sharks found within the Arabian Gulf and Gulf of Oman. The aims of the project include determining the population dynamics, movements and areas of importance for the whale sharks as well as attempt to determine why they visit our region.

Diving and in particular underwater photography are part of a growing industry within the region. Given a small amount of training, any diver can become a researcher, turning each and every dive into a potential data collection experience. Many photographers are willing to participate in research activities and we have frequently used dive sites that support important marine life. Collectively, our regional divers and dive operators spend more time underwater and cover more area than any dedicated research project could ever hope to achieve. We are therefore hoping to turn our Gulf wide diving community into a powerful data collection tool.

The project is being run in association with the Emirates Diving Association based in the UAE; who are helping to spread the word by getting the local dive community involved and providing logistical support for data collection. One very important part of the project is to feed the sightings back into the community and so there will be quarterly updates sightings within the gulf for EDA members via their quarterly magazine and you can get frequent updates of news and sightings by joining www.facebook.com/sharkwatcharabia. If a new animal is identified then the person who took the photo will be given the chance to name that individual.

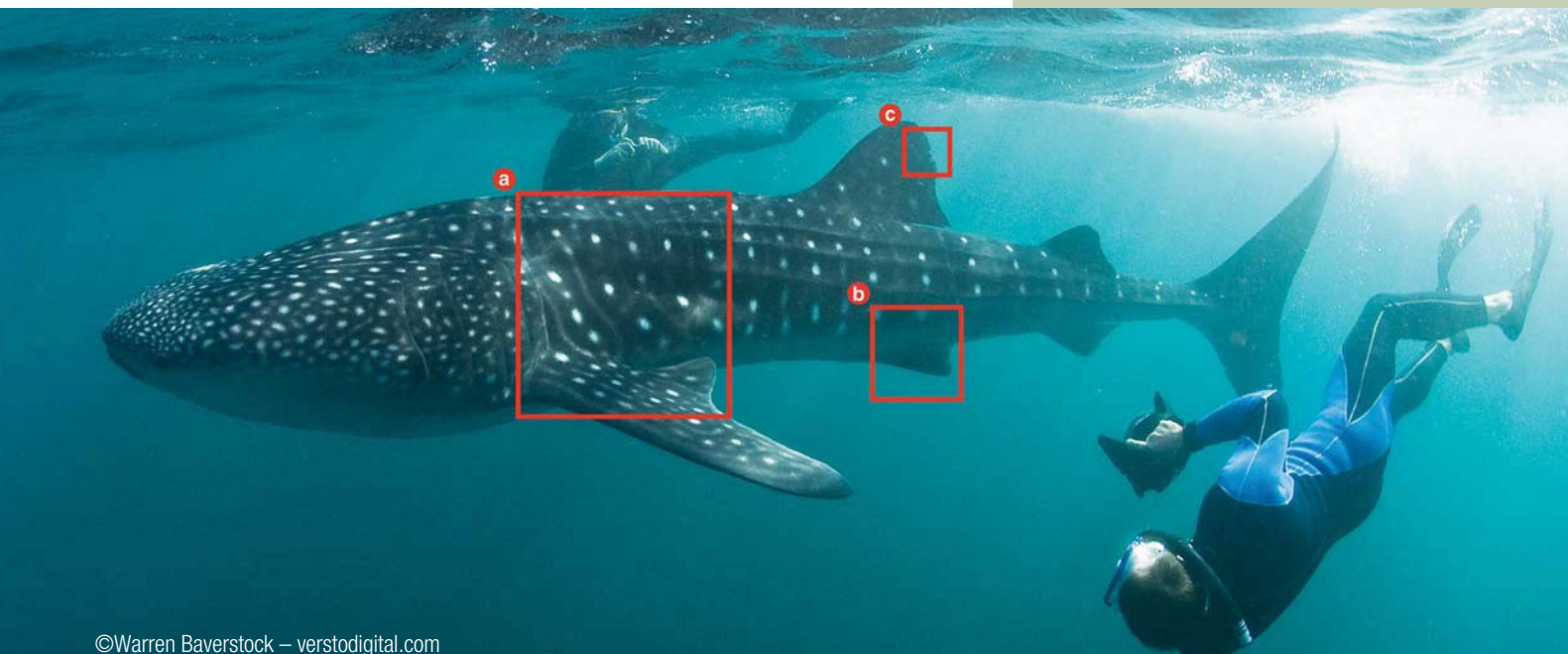
If you have encountered a whale shark in the waters of Kuwait, Iraq, Saudi Arabia (Gulf coast), Qatar, Bahrain, Iran, Pakistan, UAE or Oman in the past three years then we would like to hear from you. A website has been launched as the primary data collection tool of the project, this is:



www.sharkwatcharabia.com. Anyone who sights any species of shark is invited to log onto the site and submit their data.

Sharkwatch Arabia was born from the decision to create a regional database taken during last year's 2009 Arabian Seas Whale Shark Research Symposium & Workshop. Sharkwatch Arabia is being run in association with the Sharkquest Arabia Initiative and under the umbrella of Jonathan Ali Khan's Arabian Whale Shark Research Program; a project that aims to study all aspects of whale shark ecology throughout the region. The ability to identify individuals within a population is an important aspect of any ecological or conservation based study. Information about correct photography for the identification of individual whale sharks can be found on the website. The goal of the project is to better understand the ecology of the study animals with a view to providing increased conservation in the face of environmental impacts and climate.

Each and every person who ventures into our regional waters has the ability to help by simply sending in their photographs and sightings. We hope that by establishing this research project that we will be able to provide information that will help with the conservation of whale sharks throughout the Arabian Gulf and Gulf of Oman.



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Fig. 1: Whale shark ID tips: (a) the spot pattern on a whale shark is unique to every individual just like a human fingerprint. Try to take photos of the areas behind the gill slits on the left and right flank to help with identification. (b) make a note of the shark's sex (male = claspers) if you are unsure take a photo of this area to check later. (c) take photographs of any unique markings or scars on any part of the body.