

Oslob Whale Sharks

by Attila Kaszo

Whale Sharks (*Rhincodon typus*) are slow-moving filter feeding sharks and the largest known non-cetacean species. Claims of individuals over 14 m (46 ft) long and weighing at least 30 metric tones (66,000 lb) are not uncommon.

Whale sharks originated about 60 million years ago, and today, they are listed internationally as a vulnerable species, but still commercially targeted in some Asian countries.

Fortunately, not all Asian countries hold the same harvesting view, and many fishing communities have turned to tourism as the main source of income.

Donsol and Oslob in the Philippines are such examples. Whale sharks had been visiting these regions for decades and during those decades were hunted. In 1998 at Donsol, they were apparently “discovered” and after international support hunting turned into whale shark watching which turned into eco tourism. Oslob went much the same way but later in 2006.

There appears to be some controversy and confusion regarding the Oslob site, in that feeding the whale sharks by the locals has

somehow upset the ecosystem and accordingly drawn criticism from some quarters. Clearly, feeding any wild animal is not something that should be encouraged, but given the relatively small amounts of fish “burley” that is put into the water and the area in which these sharks are being fed poses little impact on the regions biodiversity. More important to the animal’s welfare is the extent of physical human contact with these giants.

As human nature has it, people get a bit excited when a 14-meter fish swims past, so the impulse to touch it and grab that Kodak moment seems to prevail over common sense. There is certainly a case in keeping people at a “safe” distance, and I would completely support such action. On the flip side however, whale sharks like most wild creatures have the

*Above: Nikon D800 Nikkor 16mm
Available light @ f22, 1/125, ISO 200*

*Right: Nikon D800 Nikkor 16mm
Available light @ f8, 1/320, ISO 400*





Above: Nikon D800 Nikkor 16mm Available light @f8, 1/500, ISO 200

Above right: Nikon D800 Nikkor 16mm Available light @f8, 1/160, ISO 400



ability to leave the area or move away from a hazard almost instantly. So if the shark wants to it does just that, as do whales I have worked with and so on. In fact some of my best work has been outside the “viewing areas” where the sharks had left the feeding zones and were swimming about 200 meters away and in a blink almost on top of me having a close up and personal and then gently swimming away.

Before I went to Oslob, I read a number of petitions against visiting the area, mainly for the reasons I have outlined, and that some reports indicated that the sharks had severe

rub marks on their necks, apparently from trying to get into the boats carrying food, and other reports suggesting that the sharks had deep cuts and abrasions over their bodies from boats crashing into them.

I saw none of this at all. The only cut I saw on a shark was on its back and it could well have been an outboard propeller, I don't know. All the sharks I saw, about thirteen, looked very healthy and active, and had no problem swimming away from people in the water.

My research also indicated that the sharks at Oslob were transient and that different individuals moved through the region during the year. Unfortunately there is still relatively little known about these sharks, which makes management of them difficult. Non the less, erring on the side of caution may be the prudent way to go, along with considering the needs of the locals who depend on some form of income for their survival.

From my perspective, it's a better option to accept how the village manages its resources now than to entertain the harvesting practices of the past.

Attila Kaszo
www.ambvision.com