

The Gentle Giants of the Sea

Great whites, tiger sharks, bull sharks and the oceanic white tips are considered the most aggressive sharks and animals of the sea, but also included in the shark family are the giant but gentle whale sharks. These massive creatures grow up to 40 feet long and weigh in at around 20 tons. Unfortunately, the number of whale sharks is decreasing and their status has recently moved from vulnerable to endangered. These fish are particularly susceptible to ship strikes, are negatively impacted by marine pollution along with the growing industry for coveted whale shark fins, oil, and meat and are becoming increasingly dependent on tourism. In order to save these animals, society and people around the world must work proactively to make these conditions known.

When people think of endangered species they are lead to believe that major threats are things that they cannot change such as global warming, yet for whale sharks, a threat is as simple as a collision with a ship. Whale sharks are known as surface feeders. Surface feeders acquire the majority of their food from the surface of the water, the same place where boats and cruise ships can be found. There have been several instances where a whale shark has come up to the surface to feed and has been struck by a ship. These ship strikes can cause sharp and blunt traumas. Sharp trauma occurs when the propeller of a boat hits the body or tail cutting through flesh resulting in serious scarring and even death in cases where the spinal cord or major arteries are injured. In 2012 a propeller from a small fishing boat slashed a whale shark across the face while tourists were feeding the animal from the ship (Pappas). Blunt trauma is caused by the hull of the boat striking the fish. The damage done by this type of strike is not as apparent but can cause bruising and broken bones. There have been several reported instances of cruise ships pinning whale sharks and other marine life across the hull and not noticing until pulling into the harbor

(Leonard). Off the coast of Mexico thousands of whale sharks congregate to feed and mate in the plankton rich water although problems begin to arise. There are two major cruise ship corporations, Carnival and Royal Caribbean, that cruise straight through this breeding ground. There is an extremely high risk of ship strikes from these cruise ships going through this area. If these companies were to shift their route by a mere seven miles, they would be able to steer clear of the breeding grounds (Leonard). These seven miles can make an incredible difference and even help to save these magnificent animals.

While the average person does not operate a cruise ship or even a boat, their daily actions can still have a direct impact on the strength of the whale shark population. The plastics we use on a daily basis have become a serious threat to the health of whale sharks and the size of their population. As time goes on, people around the world continue to use more and more single use plastics, such as straws and disposable coffee cups, which often end up in rivers, creeks, lakes, ponds, and the ocean. This plastic floats near the surface of the water, the same place where whale sharks feed. These plastics eventually break up into tiny pieces that get sucked into whale sharks mouths when they are filter feeding. These microplastics expose the animals to toxic chemicals which pose detrimental effects such as, altering hormones, which regulate growth, metabolism, and reproductive functions (Gabbatiss). This is also a serious issue because these toxic chemicals can reduce life span. Because whale sharks don't produce many offspring over their lifetime, a shorter lifespan will reduce reproduction even further, eventually leading to extinction. To help reduce the amount of waste in the water, citizens should actively pick up trash in their neighborhood or when they are out and about. Many organizations host monthly

beach cleanups which are a huge help in cleaning up populated beaches and water for the animals that call the ocean home.

Many environmentally aware people know of the extreme amount of sharks being killed to be sold and eaten in countries in Asia, but the average person would be shocked to discover that whale sharks are among those being slaughtered. An estimated one hundred to two hundred million sharks are killed annually to be eaten in shark fin soup, a delicacy in China and other Asian countries (www.sharkfriends.com). New studies have found that slaughterhouses in Asia are now processing whale sharks to be used in whale shark soup (Skerry). This new industry for whale shark fins and meat is already slaughtering six hundred whale sharks per year, and this number will continue to grow. This practice is illegal as whale sharks are protected under Chinese and international law, although many slaughterhouses are able to slip through the cracks and do whatever they can to keep their business running, and it's easy to understand why. A single whale shark carcass is worth thirty thousand dollars. The meat is sold for food, fins are sold to restaurants for shark-fin soup, skin is sold to manufacturers for bags, and oil is used for companies that make fish oil supplements. Although no parts of the shark are being wasted, this does not justify the act of further endangering these beautiful creatures, especially when it is already against the law. Yet the very people that hate to see these beautiful animals being slaughtered, are also playing a part in their extinction.

It is a dream of many around the world to be able to swim next to the majestic creature that is a whale shark. These ocean lovers would be horrified to know that this experience is putting whale sharks in even more danger. There are hundreds of whale shark tour companies scattered across the globe in places such as Baja California, Cabo San Lucas, the Ningaloo Reef,

Cozumel, and even the Galapagos Islands. One of the most popular tourist destinations, in terms of whale sharks, is Oslob, Cebu located in the Philippines. The aspect that makes Oslob so special is the fact that tour operators hand feed the whale sharks daily. Even though this may seem like a once in a lifetime sight to see, this hand feeding practice has proven to have a critical impact on the whale sharks. The whale sharks in this area have now taken up a habit of loitering in the water only fifty meters offshore, just waiting for tour guides to come and feed them an unlimited buffet of shrimp (Goldman). This may seem like a harmless habit but it can lead to an unhealthy lifestyle. Al Dove, a whale shark biologist at Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta states, “That’s the anxiety, that you create an animal that’s very dependent on humans and isn’t able to look after itself.” If whale sharks become completely dependent on human feeding they will eventually not be able to live in the wild. Because these animals are so massive, it would not be suitable for them to live in an aquarium because they need room to swim. If they cannot live in the wild on their own and cannot safely live in captivity, they will eventually become extinct. The very dream that many have around the world may become the leading cause in whale shark extinction.

Writing this essay has introduced me to many aspects of life around the world that can harm and threaten whale sharks, but writing an essay will not do anything to change how I personally impact the environment and the oceans around the world. I have made it a habit to pick up any trash I see when I am out and about in nature, at the beach, at school, or even walking around my neighborhood. I plan to work with a local coffee shop, Brick and Bell, to convince them to trade their single use plastic straws to biodegradable paper straws. To help raise awareness I have decided to create an Instagram account dedicated to informing people

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about the struggles these beautiful creatures and other marine life come upon

(@strugglesofashark). I will also be posting a Youtube video on the subject in the near future

(account is peytonsteffek). My goal is not only to save whale sharks, but to save other marine life and our planet as a whole.

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