

Whale shark's wayward journey

Marine scientist **mark meekan** had the feeling that something was amiss when the five-metre-long whale shark he was tracking via satellite suddenly appeared to be heading inland.

Dr Meekan, of the Australian Institute of Marine Science in Darwin, had been following the movements of the enormous fish for months on its 4000km journey from Christmas Island, 500km south of Jakarta in Indonesia, across to West Papua, and back south again.

The high-tech tracking tag on its back was collecting important new information about these mysterious giants - the world's largest fish - which can migrate up to 12,000km and are under threat from ocean-going vessels in Asia which harvest the sharks for commercial purposes.

But out of the blue, the shark's journey stopped abruptly just off West Timor.

Dr Meekan recalled how he realised with dismay that the tag, and perhaps the whale shark, had ended up on a remote beach. Then, to his surprise, the tag began to move inland.

"I could follow its path to a village and I could see it was sitting in a house," Dr Meekan said.

After overlaying the signal on to Google Earth maps, he quickly launched a rescue operation for the device because "the data it contained was absolutely invaluable".

A research associate at Charles Darwin University, Conrad Speed, went to the far-flung village about three kilometres inland, pinpointed the house and offered a reward for the \$4000 tag's return.

"A local villager looking for turtle eggs had found it on the beach," Dr Meekan said.

White scratch marks on the blue surface revealed the tag probably had been ripped from the back of the gentle whale shark by another shark and then washed ashore.

Very little is known about the behaviour of whale sharks in the open ocean. But the record stored on the recovered tag revealed that the gigantic fish had dived to depths of more than 1000 metres.

"It's extremely dark and very cold down there, less than 10 degrees," Dr Meekan said.

Scientists are concerned that the average length of whale sharks at Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia has dropped from seven metres to five metres in the past 10 years.

Numbers have also declined, with collisions with vessels a likely source of deaths.

With West Australian Tourism relying heavily on the whale sharks drawing thousands of visitors to Ningaloo Reef every year, debate on how to best address the declining numbers has become more intense.

"About 25 per cent of the animals at Ningaloo have scars that could be attributed to boat strikes," Dr Meekan said.

Understanding more about their movements and slow reproductive biology were the keys to their protection.

"For such a rapid decline to be observed in such a long-lived species suggests a strong mortality source," he said.

Fishing in Asia is also depleting numbers and researchers have established a project to help develop small ecotourism operations in Indonesia to preserve the ocean giants.

"We see that as one of the most useful ways to ensure the future of the animals," he said.



photograph
Courtesy Rob Harcourt

text
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