



Media Release
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SOSF scientist features in BBC Natural World Special WHALE SHARK!

Whale Shark! airs in Natural World's 25th Anniversary series on BBC 2 on Tuesday 18th November. The film features SOSF marine scientist David Rowat and his whale shark project in the Seychelles as he tries to help biologist Mark Meekan on his year-long quest to fathom the mystery of where and how the largest fish in the sea hides.

Producer/director Emma Ross says: "These sharks are as big as a bus yet despite their bulk, they are hard to find and we know very little about them. Females and babies are rarely seen. We don't know where they breed or travel. It's thought that they travel great distances but where, and why? No-one knows."

In an effort to answer some of the questions, the film's Dr Meekan tagged six young males with satellite trackers, an underwater camera and dive computer, as they swam through spawning coral at the Ningaloo Reef, Western Australia, then followed them by plane, boat, underwater and from a micro-light, calling at beautiful Indian Ocean locations, such as the Seychelles and Christmas Island, along the way.

Data from Rowat's pop-off satellite archival tags (PSAT) have recently shown that whale sharks spend up to 60% of their time less than 10 meters from the surface, but that they are also able to make dives in excess of 1,000 meters.

The data that has been gathered has also revealed that the sharks often migrate away from Seychelles in very divergent directions, even when tagged just minutes apart in the same feeding aggregations. Some of these migrations have recorded distances of travel in excess of 3,600 kilometers, passing through the territorial waters of many countries in the Indian Ocean. "As international concern for effective conservation and management of migratory shark species grows, it is becoming increasingly important to have accurate information about the migration routes of the species concerned," says Rowat.

Analysis of Meekan's tag data and whale shark DNA sample reveals whale sharks time their visit to Christmas Island to feast on one of nature's most spectacular annual events – the brief but vast red crab migration – and travel 1,000 or more kms a month.

The development of a robust satellite tagging methodology has now become a priority with the SOSF scientist, and if successfully field tested it has the potential to generate wide reaching implications throughout the research community. Through the generation of data based on whale shark movements throughout the entire Indian Ocean, this project subsequently aims to develop into a cornerstone for an ocean-wide monitoring program.