

Whale Shark Provisioning: What do we know and where do we stand; The case study of Oslob, Philippines

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Background. Provisioning is a growing practice used to facilitate wildlife-tourist interaction, especially with elusive marine species, but still little is known about its effect on the host species. This work discusses the practice, effect and proposed measures to manage the whale shark provisioning activities and related tourism industry in the waters of Oslob, Philippines.

Methods. Since March 2012, the research team has been studying daily the whale shark population, the tourism industry and its compliances with the local and national laws. During 443 days of survey, 135 individual whale sharks were identified within the interaction area, 197h of shark behavioral observations and tourist compliance surveys have been collected along with 45 biopsy samples, 1000h of dive profiles from TDR tags and 500 tourist satisfaction questionnaires.

Results. Since its official opening in January 2012 more than 140,000 interaction tickets have been sold bringing over 1M USD to the local community and making it one of the largest marine wildlife tourist attractions in South East Asia. The benefits for the community and regional economy are undeniable, however behavioral modification, extended residency time, poor nutritional value of provided food and thermal stress related to the extended permanence in shallow water together with habitat destruction caused by poor diving practices and unregulated coastal developments are some of the quantified side effects of this industry.

Conclusion. A series of meeting with the stakeholders and an education campaign have been initiated as bottom up approach and an adaptive management model based on the identification of the limits of acceptable change is being developed in collaboration with the Authorities to address current limitations in the long-term sustainable management of the whale shark watching industry in Oslob.

Key words: Provisioning, whale shark watching, limits of acceptable change, Oslob, Philippines, Tourism.