



Utila

Join SRI's Whale Shark Research in the Caribbean

Utila

Utila is the third largest of the Bay Islands of Honduras. It is located in the Caribbean Sea on the southern end of the Mesoamerican barrier reef system.

Whale Shark Research

SRI has been conducting research on the whale sharks off Utila since 1998, and in 1999 assisted in drafting protective legislation for whale sharks in Honduran waters. Using satellite telemetry, SRI has tracked sharks from Utila to the Swan Islands, and along the coasts of Belize, Mexico, Texas and Florida.



During 2009, we will also be collaborating with Ecocean which has developed pattern-recognition software that enables photographic identification of individual whale sharks.

Objectives

This project is field oriented and will seek to answer the following specific questions:

- Do individual whale shark return to Utila on a seasonal and/or annual basis?
- How much time do the sharks spend feeding on a shoal of baitfish?
- Are they only feeding on the shoals of baitfish?
- What are the baitfish feeding upon?
- What are the sea surface temperatures when whale sharks are present?
- When do the whale sharks leave the waters surrounding the island?

We will also:

- Gather photographs of whale sharks for the Ecocean database.
- Gather data showing the economic benefits of whale shark tourism to the local economy.



The Whale Shark

The Whale Shark is the largest fish in the sea, reaching a length of 40 feet and more. These “gentle giants” feed on plankton, and are considered harmless to man. In the waters surrounding Utila they are usually observed feeding with shoals of tuna.

Their gentle disposition makes them highly vulnerable to over-fishing and slow to recover from over-exploitation. Because of this, conservationists are concerned about the vulnerability of the whale shark and the threat of extinction. A five-year aerial survey conducted by SRI along the coast of South Africa documented a drastic decline in whale sharks. The shark is also considered a ‘species of concern’ on the Red List of the IUCN (World Conservation Union). In 1999, Honduras became the first nation in the Caribbean to legislate protection for the whale shark. In 2002, India and the Philippines successfully proposed the whale shark for inclusion on Appendix II of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species). This research is designed to obtain data necessary for CITES Appendix I protection for whale sharks.

Quantifying the value of whale shark tourism to the economy of Honduras serves to ensure their continued protection and encourages other countries to legislate similar protection for the sharks as living natural resources.



Deep Blue Resort

“Deep Blue is a 5-Star Gold Palm PADI dive resort on the beachfront surrounded by coconut palms. The



resort has 10 spacious, air conditioned deluxe rooms, all with large private balconies overlooking its own white sand beach and the crystal waters of the Caribbean.

“From the beach, divers have access to unlimited shore diving night or day on 3 of the best south side dive sites. Scuba diving is rich and varied with more than 130 buoyed sites around the island. The North side of Utila has the second largest barrier reef in the world with awe inspiring sheer walls dropping to over 1,000 meters. The South side of Utila consists mainly of shallow fringing reefs, the top of the reef at around 5 meters dropping down to between 30 & 40 meters.

“Then of course during the surface intervals the whale shark search is on.”*Steve Fox*

Space on these expeditions is limited to 12 individuals

Cost: \$1,760 (includes accommodations, meals, diving, and roundtrip transportation from Utila airport to the resort)

Available Spaces:

March 14 to March 21, 2009.....7 spaces

March 21 to March 28, 2009.....7 spaces

March 28 to April 4, 2009..... 10 spaces

April 18 to April 25, 2009.....6 spaces

Call now to reserve your space

Telephone: 609.921.3522

Email: expeditions@sharks.org

Note: When your space is booked through SRI on these or any weeks, Deep Blue Resort donates 20% of the cost to SRI's conservation fund, and thus 20% of your cost is deductible from your 2009 US federal income taxes.

