

# Whale Shark



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and Brad Norman**

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written by

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## What is it?

In 2018, the people of Nukunonu saw something swimming in the lagoon. It was very big.

“What is it?” they asked.

The children wanted to go swimming, but their parents told them it wasn't safe to go in the water.



Some people thought it was a whale.  
Some people thought it was a shark.  
Some people thought it was a great white shark!

One of the teachers said,  
“I think it's a whale shark,  
but we need more information.”



# Asking the experts

The teacher emailed us.

We are research scientists who work in Western Australia.

We study whale sharks in the water around Australia, and in other parts of the world. It is very unusual to find a whale shark in the lagoon of an atoll that doesn't have a deep channel through the reef.

We were surprised.

The elders invited us to Nukunonu to study the whale shark.

We were very excited!

After a long journey, we reached Nukunonu. We were welcomed by the community.

“Thank you for inviting us to your beautiful atoll,” we said. “The most important thing to know is that whale sharks aren't dangerous and don't eat people. It's safe to go in the water.”



# Whale or shark?

Whale sharks are a type of shark, and all sharks are fish.

We call them whale sharks because they are as big as whales. They are the biggest fish in the sea.



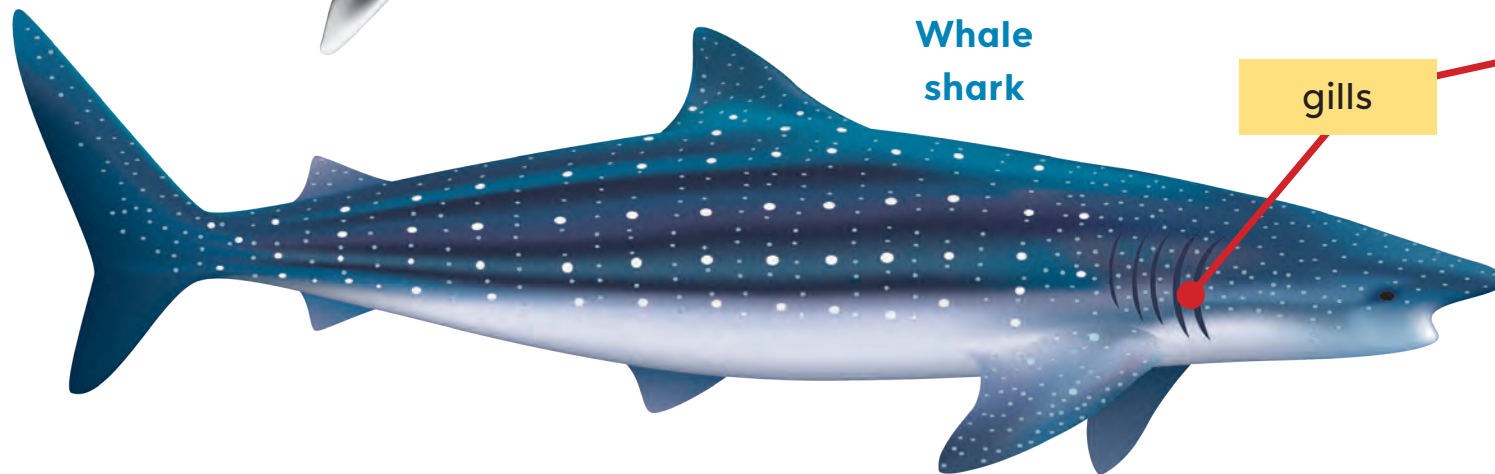
Whale sharks eat plankton.

Plankton are some of the smallest creatures in the sea.

Whale sharks are fish, so they have gills to help them get oxygen from the water. They don't come up to the surface to breathe.

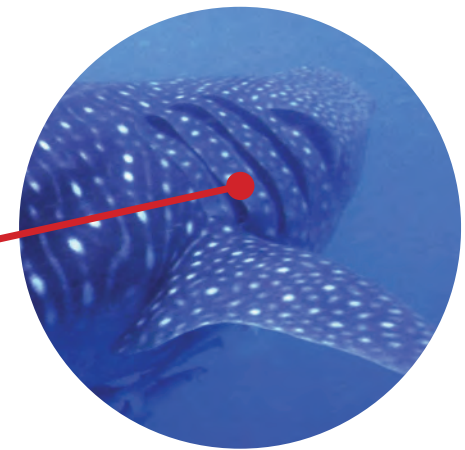


Humpback whale



Whale shark

gills



## Where is it?

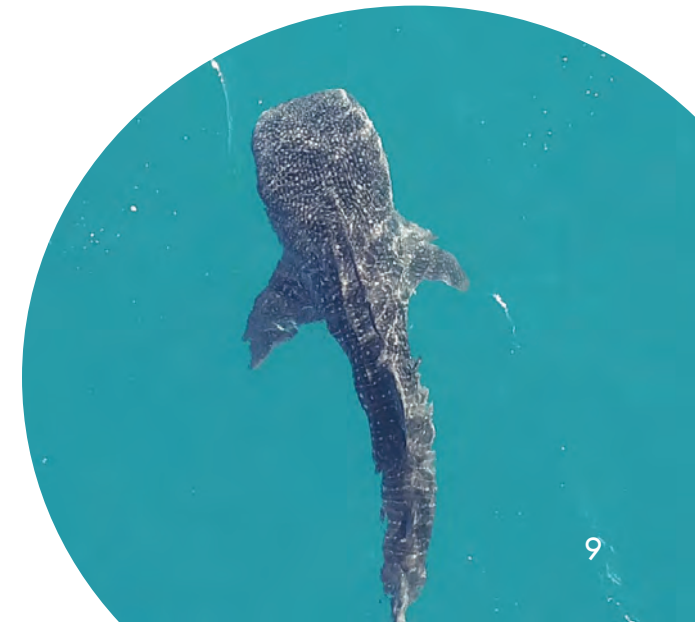
We wanted to see the whale shark, so we could begin our research. But first, we had to find it.

Some of the men went out in boats and searched the lagoon. We also used a drone to help with the search.



Even though we searched the entire lagoon with the drone, it took us seven days to find it!

At last, we found it!



## Measuring the whale shark

Some of us got into the water and swam near the whale shark. We wanted to know how big it was.

We measured it and found that the whale shark in Nukunonu lagoon was a little bigger than a person. It was about 3 metres long.

That's quite small for a whale shark, so we knew it was still young.

Whale sharks are very small when they are born.

They are only about 50–60 cm long. But they grow very quickly.



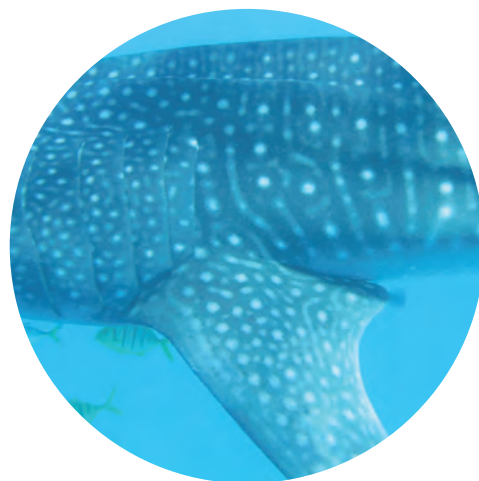
We think this one probably got into the lagoon soon after it was born.

One day, this whale shark could grow to be 18 metres long!



## Up close with the whale shark

Each whale shark looks different because it has its own pattern of spots and stripes, so you can recognise a whale shark by its pattern – just like you can use fingerprints to recognise a person.



**TOK-001's pattern of spots and stripes**

Samantha took some underwater photographs of the whale shark's spot pattern.

When we discover a new whale shark, we give it a name and number.

We called this whale shark TOK-001 because it was the first whale shark to be recorded in Tokelau.

The photos of TOK-001 are on a website, so people all around the world can see this whale shark's spot pattern.



## Tracking the whale shark

*We attached a tag to the whale shark's dorsal fin so we can track it.*



The tag sends information about the whale shark's movements, such as where it swims and how fast it can go.



## Visiting the school

We visited the school and told the students all about whale sharks.

Whale sharks are endangered, so we need people to watch out for whale sharks to help scientists find out more about where they are living.

**One day,  
the whale shark  
could get this big!**





When it is older,  
TOK-001 will have to leave the lagoon  
to find a mate in the ocean.  
How will it get out?  
TOK-001 will need help  
from the people of Nukunonu.



**Find out more**

[www.whaleshark.org](http://www.whaleshark.org)

