



Whale Shark

Guide training in Mexico

theTravel
Foundation



Case Study

We created a manual to help boat trip operators protect the largest fish on Earth



The whale shark is the largest fish in the sea, growing to about the length of a double decker bus. It is classified as 'Endangered' by the IUCN.

Boat trips to see these sharks are popular in areas of Mexico including Isla Mujeres and Cancun. The animals are slow-moving, often near the surface of the water and, as they feed mainly on plankton, pose no danger to divers. In the last five years, the popularity of whale shark snorkeling trips has grown tremendously.

With the problem of over-fishing affecting their livelihoods, many local fishermen began to operate whale shark tours with little or no experience of guiding or knowledge of the whale shark.

In 2008 the Travel Foundation identified that training in environmental interpretation, safety procedures and customer management would help guides ensure the safety and well-being of whale sharks during tourist excursions. This would also lead to a better experience for tourists.



What we did

"This training course encouraged me to be more aware of the environment and to have more rigorous measures with my clients regarding the reef conservancy. It also improved my communication skills with the travellers and my appreciation of all the nature that surrounds us."

Ricardo Arellano Gallegos,
Dive Master

Working with local organisations

We worked with local and international organisations including the Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme (MWSRP) to develop training courses for guides.

EcoColors, a Cancun-based company with over six years of experience in running whale shark trips was responsible for delivering the training.

Delivering training

The first 40-hour course was delivered in November 2009, training 23 local guides. It covered areas including biology and ecology of whale sharks, research, conservation, guest briefings, codes of conduct and guidelines for whale shark encounters.

Certification

A manual for the training, with presentations, reference notes and activity cards, was provided online, and at the end of the course participants received a certificate.



Working in Collaboration

The Travel Foundation developed partnerships between several local organisations, as well as Mexico's Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.

CONANP (Government body responsible for protected areas conservation)

AMTAVE (Mexican association of adventure travel and ecotourism)

EcoColors (Tour operator in charge of training with 6 years of experience running whale shark trips)

MWSRP (Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme)

SEDETUR (Tourism organisation of the State of Quintana Roo)

SECTUR (Tourism organisation for Mexico)

“As an Ecotourism supplier, we at EcoColors feel very pleased to see raised the quality level of the tour guides during this 2008 Whale Shark season. Over prior years we had to lead Whale Shark tours with Biologists or Naturalists, now during this year we were able to contract certified local tour guides who not only had the theoretical and hands on knowledge, but also who delivered an outstanding quality service to customers besides showing their environmental commitment with the Whale Shark species. This experience gave us tremendous satisfaction and states our will to keep working on the training field to build our local guides of Isla Mujeres and Holbox with more professional skills.”

Kenneth Johnson, Trainer of Whale Shark Observation and Group Management Course 2008 and Executive Director of EcoColors

The Benefits

Following our collaboration with the Quintana Roo and Baja California Sur state governments, the training is now a mandatory requirement for all whale shark guides in the region.

New legislation

This project directly influenced whale shark guiding legislation: the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment accredited the training and introduced new legislation requiring all new guides to have completed the training course, ensuring that all guides operating the tours are certified.

A positive experience for tourists

71% of tourists interviewed rated the tours taken with licenced guides as excellent.

More income for guides

By providing a better customer experience, 60% of guides interviewed reported an increase in income from tips. Of these, around three quarters of the guides estimated that tips had increased by more than 50%.



"I'm happy to get the official accreditation through this course. Now that I have this training I feel more confident when giving information to my clients during the tour, and they feel as well more secure as they are doing the activity with a certified guide. Thank you for this opportunity to improve myself!"

Tania Sandoval,
Tour Guide



“The Shark Trust supports educational tools which promote the welfare of sharks as the absolute priority in all ecotourism ventures – an approach clearly paramount in the Travel Foundation’s Whale Shark Training Manual. As more tourists seek out experiences with the majestic Whale Shark, the manual is a welcome addition to responsible ecotourism management. Responsible ecotourism operators can in-turn raise awareness about sharks, inspiring people to participate in their protection, while providing a sustainable alternative income to shark fishing.”

John Richardson, Conservation Officer at the Shark Trust

Top three things guides gained from the course

- 1** Knowledge of the whaleshark, its behaviour and the marine environment
- 2** How to provide better information and an improved tourist experience
- 3** How to correctly and safely interact with the whaleshark

In numbers

28 out of 30

GUIDES REPORTED MORE POSITIVE FEEDBACK FROM GUESTS AND/OR MORE TIPS¹

71%

OF TOURISTS RATED TOURS TAKEN WITH LICENCED GUIDES AS **EXCELLENT**

30%

ESTIMATED INCREASE IN INCOME OF WHALE SHARK TOUR GUIDES FOLLOWING TRAINING

1,500

VIEWS OF WHALE SHARK TRAINING MANUAL ON WWW.THETRAVELFOUNDATION.ORG.UK

ALL 30 GUIDES INTERVIEWED WOULD RECOMMEND THE TRAINING TO OTHER GUIDES AND BOAT OPERATORS²

¹ Isla Mujeres

² Holbox

To find out how the Travel Foundation can help you develop tourism that is better for local people and the environment, contact us at

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