



Manta Ray

There are two species of Manta Rays- Giant Oceanic Manta Rays (*Manta birostris*) and Reef Rays (*Manta alfredi*). Manta Rays are the two largest species of Ray, as well as being some of the largest species of fish on earth. The enchanting Manta Rays inhabit the waters of the Ningaloo Marine Park all year round, where they are usually found in large groups that are close to the surface of the water. Although there are a large number of Mantas in the Ningaloo Marine Park, they are globally a declining population and are considered 'near threatened' by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Mantas are incredibly intelligent, and out of all of the 32,000 species of fish, Manta Rays have the largest brains.

Manta Rays are enormous, flat-bodied animals with two sets of fins- cephalic and pectoral fins. The pectoral fins are large triangular-shaped wings that have been recorded as large as 9 metres, but are usually within 2-7 metres. Their common name 'devil ray' was given because of the two cephalic fins, which are located on either side of the manta ray's head look like devil horns. These animals are sometimes mistaken as dangerous due to their long, thin tail. However, their tail lacks a barb or stinger so it is completely harmless to humans. Mantas have 18 rows of tiny teeth on their lower jaw, however these are not used for feeding. Instead, Mantas have 5 pairs of gills located underneath their head that filter out their food.

Being filter feeders, Mantas eat plankton, which is made up of algae, plants and some small animals. Mantas will use their two cephalic fins to funnel the plankton-rich water into their large, gaping mouths. The Manta's gills will then catch their prey in the plates along each gill arch, called gill rakers. On average, a Manta Ray will eat approximately 3-8% of their body weight in plankton each day! Individual Mantas will use specific feeding techniques, including barrel rolling. This is where the Manta literally rolls vertically backwards, sometimes for several hours at a time. They have also been seen using cooperative and coordinated feeding techniques with other Manta Rays in order to get more food, which is very intelligent behavior.

Male Manta Rays get quite aggressive whilst mating, and the courting process often involves the female trying to swim away. After mating, the fetus develops in an egg inside the mother's body. The fetus will stay in the egg for the entire gestation period (the length of which is not accurately known), but hatches internally before the mother gives birth to the live young. When they are born, they are rolled up, and can weigh up to 11 kg. Mothers are believed to abandon their young almost straight away, which is one of the reasons why the survival rate for young Mantas is so low- they can't protect themselves against predation at such an early age.

Did you know?

Mantas are famous for their acrobatic displays both underwater, and out of the water. They have been known to leap around half a metre into the air before returning to the water. The reason they do this is not known for certain.