



REEF SHARK

Reef Sharks are found in the warmer tropical and subtropical waters that are associated with coral reefs. They are at home amongst the coral and under ledges, a behaviour which gave rise to their name- 'reef shark'. There are five different types of reef sharks in the world: Blacktip, Gray, Caribbean, Whitetip, and Silvertip Reef Sharks. Only the Whitetip, Blacktip, and Gray Reef Sharks are found in the waters of Ningaloo Reef Marine Park though. Reef Sharks are most active at night or when the tide is slack, and will generally spent their time during the day resting.

The body of a Reef Shark is generally more slender and smaller than other species of shark. They have blunt, rounded snouts and their body is usually a grey/brown colour. Their All sharks, as fish, have gills that they use to breath underwater. They also have spiracles, which are openings located just behind the shark's eyes. Spiracles are gill slits that allow the shark to breathe in the oxygenated water even when it is not moving. Reef Sharks will grow up to 2 metres in length, and will weigh up to 45 kilograms. The three species found in Ningaloo Marine Park vary slightly in appearance. The Blacktip Reef Shark has a distinct black patch at the end of each of its fins, and the Whitetip Reef Shark has a white tip on each fin. The Gray Reef Shark has a white-tipped dorsal fin and black tips on it's other fins.

These sharks are apex predators on the coral reef, which means they are at the top of the food chain. Their diet includes fish, squid, octopus, crabs, lobsters, and shrimp. Reef Sharks are common visitors to the 'cleaning stations' at Ningaloo Reef, which are maintained by species of fish that will happily remove parasites as well as diseased and dead tissue. Reef Sharks will swim through the cleaning station repeatedly, getting cleaned for 5-10 seconds each time. The fish clean sharks and rays in exchange for food- a symbiotic relationship where both the fish and the sharks benefit.

In Reef Sharks, the pups develop inside the mother. The pregnancy of Reef Sharks in Australia has been averaged at around 7-9 months, but different countries have recorded gestation period lengths as long as 16 months. Usually between 1 and 5 pups develop inside the mother at a time. The females give birth to live young, and these pups are usually only about 120-160 cm long. Pups do not reach maturity until they are around 5 years old. Mating takes place in northern Australia in January and February.

Reef Sharks have been given the conservation status of 'near threatened' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Isolated populations of Reef Sharks are suspected to be decreasing due to the effects of overfishing, and because they are being caught accidentally in fishing nets. They also have a relatively slow reproduction rate, which means they are unable to recover from large population declines as easily as other species.

Did you know? Some species will display cooperative feeding, where the sharks will work together to herd fish into a crevice or against a rock so they can hunt them more efficiently.