

## Frequently asked questions - Whale Shark Management Program

The 2026 draft whale shark management program has been released, and the community is encouraged to have a say on the program by emailing [wsmp@dbca.wa.gov.au](mailto:wsmp@dbca.wa.gov.au)

The management program has long been considered world-class best-practice, and the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) has undertaken a review of the program to ensure it contemporary and informed by new data and stakeholder feedback.

The following frequently asked questions respond to stakeholder queries identified during the review.

### Where can I see whale sharks?

DBCA is committed to ensuring positive conservation outcomes for whale sharks and the continuation of sustainable whale shark tourism. [We recommend visitors to Ningaloo Marine Park book a commercial tour to view these gentle giants and be guided by a trained marine guide.](#)

[Best-practice standards are in place that maintain a world-class, safe and sustainable nature-based tourism product that the State is proud of.](#)

### What are the key pressures on whale sharks and how is this managed?

Whale sharks face various pressures within their international migration route such as pollution, entanglement, fishing and injury from vessels. Pressures on whale sharks within the Ningaloo Marine Park include climate change, vessel strike and short-term disturbance of individual whale sharks from human interactions.

DBCA continues to monitor the impacts of a changing climate on marine park values including whale sharks to inform management. Whale shark interactions are managed through separation distances for all swimmers and vessels outlined in the draft Program and the Biodiversity Conservation Regulations 2018. DBCA will continue to educate the public on separation distances and whale shark conservation.

The draft Program identifies best-practice standards to conserve the species and provide for sustainable tourism including research priorities such as the investigation of the potential impacts of vessels on whale sharks to inform future management options.

### What information contributed to the review?

The review has been informed by an assessment of performance measures, a review of scientific literature, analysis of long-term temporal and spatial monitoring data collected by commercial tour operators (CTOs) during 2011-2023, consideration of the current and potential threats facing whale sharks in WA and globally, and stakeholder feedback.

Local stakeholders and CTOs have provided valuable information to inform the draft Program. An electronic monitoring system (EMS) is installed on each of the licensed tour boats that records the location of the boat, the number and category of passengers and details of each whale shark interaction. CTOs also take photographs of individual whale sharks during interactions. The data collected through the EMS by CTOs plays a crucial role in maintaining the management program as a best-practice model and minimising disturbance to whale sharks.

Recent updates to the EMS have enhanced the ability to link individual whale sharks, interactions, and photographs to improve the timeliness and accuracy of data analysis and interaction management. Continual and precise data capture through the EMS is essential for the ongoing management of the industry, enabling adaptation to any potential impacts identified through the collected data.

DBCA values the time and effort spent by skippers and photographers in collecting this EMS data and is appreciative of its importance in informing the research and management of whale sharks.

### Will there be changes to the management of recreational and/or commercial vessels?

Pressures on whale sharks within the Ningaloo Marine Park include vessel strike and short-term disturbance of individual whale sharks from human interactions. Regulatory separation distances for all swimmers and vessels are outlined in the draft Program and the Biodiversity Conservation Regulations 2018. DBCA continues to educate the public on these requirements and regularly undertake compliance patrols.

### Will there be any change to the number of commercial whale shark licences or number of tours per day?

No change to the total number of commercial whale shark licences available (15) has been proposed as part of the draft Program. Analysis of the EMS data shows interaction time with whale sharks decreases throughout the day with multiple interactions with the same whale shark. Allowing additional commercial vessels to operate may increase the number of interactions individual whale sharks experience throughout the day, leading to shorter interaction times, and potential short-term impacts on whale sharks.

Under the licencing system and as addressed in the management program review, CTOs are permitted to run one tour per day. This condition is based on the best-practice approach and is not subject to change in the draft Program. The operation of multiple half day tours may increase vessel congestion as well as risk of impact on whale sharks from vessels and increased interactions. It may also impact visitor safety, with limited time available for safety briefings and a safety snorkel before visitors interact with a whale shark. Weather conditions in Ningaloo Marine Park are also often less favourable for boating in the afternoon.

### Will there be changes to limitations on swimmers and observers on commercial tours?

To maintain current best practice, DBCA has adopted a precautionary management approach when considering requests to increase the number of swimmers and observers allowed per tour. The current limit of twenty swimmers is considered appropriate to minimise and manage potential impacts on whale sharks during interactions and to enhance swimmer safety. Increasing this limit would require either additional swimmers per group or additional groups per vessel, which may lead to short and/or long-term impacts on whale sharks, and increased visitor risk.

DBCA has considered requests to allow observers to swim in the event of swimmers forgoing a whale shark interaction and considers that endorsing this change may lead to compliance issues and may increase the total number of swimmers per vessel. An increase in the current limit of three observers per vessel is also not proposed at this time.

### Will there be changes to separation distances, the whale shark contact zone, or operational area?

The current separation distances and contact zone parameters, including speed limits and encounter duration limits, are considered appropriate to ensure participant safety and minimise disturbance to the whale sharks. In addition, no changes to the operational area have been proposed as part of the draft Program. Suggestions received during stakeholder consultation such as: providing alternative launch sites for CTOs; installing additional moorings around snorkelling areas off Tantabiddi; and separating the Coral Bay and Exmouth operational areas, are all outside the scope of the Program but may be considered by DBCA in the future.

### Will there be changes to licence/operator fees or licensing requirements?

Licencing fees are outside the scope of the draft Program. Any changes to licencing fees will be communicated to CTOs with adequate notice. No changes to the licencing requirements for vessels, disability access, swimmers and observers, areas of operation and fees have been made as part of this review.

### What changes are being considered for the CTO staff training package to support ongoing best-practice?

The current requirement for all CTO staff to undergo mandatory DBCA led training every five years is considered appropriate and is not subject to change within the draft Program. Staff have the option to attend these training sessions more frequently should they deem it necessary, however there is no requirement to do so. Training is not mandatory for pilots; however, they have the option to attend the CTO staff training should they wish to.

Further guidance on swimming with injured whale sharks will be considered for inclusion in the staff training package provided to CTOs by DBCA. Should an injured whale shark be encountered, contact the DBCA Exmouth District office on (08) 9947 8000.

Guidelines for white shark sightings will also be considered for inclusion in the staff training package provided to CTOs.

### Will there be opportunities for the inclusion of cultural knowledge on commercial whale shark tours?

The draft Program has been written by DBCA in consultation with the Nyinggulu Coast Joint Management Body (JMB). Cultural information incorporated into commercial tours is encouraged but must be endorsed by Traditional Owners. The inclusion of cultural knowledge on commercial tours may provide visitors with a diverse tour that enhances understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal culture during their visit to Ningaloo.

### Will State and Commonwealth commercial licences be integrated?

DBCA cannot issue a single integrated licence incorporating the Commonwealth Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water's (DCCEEW) licence requirements for Commonwealth waters due to different legislative requirements and jurisdictional oversight. Activities within Commonwealth waters require separate permits and approvals from DCCEEW. DBCA and DCCEEW continue to engage collaboratively to align licensing and approval processes as much as possible.

**If you have any further questions or queries throughout this period, please contact the Project Manager at [wsmp@dbca.wa.gov.au](mailto:wsmp@dbca.wa.gov.au)**