Whale shark

Prelims: *Current events of national and international importance | Conservation*

Why in News?

Recently, a rare live sighting of a whale shark by scuba divers off the Visakhapatnam (Chinna Rushikonda) coast renewed focus on marine conservation.

- Whale shark is the ***world's largest living fish*** and a gentle, slow-moving shark.
- **Scientific Name –** Rhincodon typus.
- **Habitat –** *Epipelagic (sunlight zone) and coastal–oceanic waters.*
- Occurs from surface waters to depths exceeding 1,000 m.
- Nearshore coastal waters; food-rich zones close to shore during winter due to plankton blooms and shoaling fish.
- **Distribution –** Circumtropical and warm temperate seas worldwide.
- Found in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans.
    - **In India –** Migrates along the coastline with sightings in the eastern coast, including Visakhapatnam, Kakinada and Machilipatnam.
- **Characteristics –** Individuals can grow to about 10 metres in length and weigh between four and five tonnes.
- **Diet –** ***Filter feeder.***
- Feeds primarily on plankton, small nekton, and fish eggs
- **Behaviour –** *Highly migratory species.*
- Forms seasonal aggregations linked to food availability (plankton blooms).
- It trails shoaling fish and is unbothered by the presence of scuba divers.
- **Uniqueness –** Despite its massive size, it is a gentle, plankton-feeding shark and not aggressive.
- **Threats –** Targeted and incidental fishing.
- By-catch, especially during beach seine fishing in winter.
- Strandings and ship strikes.
- Irresponsible tourism.

- Marine pollution and plastic ingestion.
- Climate change is affecting productivity and migration patterns.
- **Conservation Status –** Need for improved monitoring, fisheries management, and international cooperation.
    - **IUCN –** Endangered
    - **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 –** Schedule I
- **Ecological Significance –**
- Plays a role in regulating plankton populations.
- *Indicator species* for ocean health due to its sensitivity to environmental change.
- Highlights that Vizag's coastal waters support diverse marine ecosystems requiring urgent conservation.



References

1. TH | Whale shark
2. ToI | Whale shark
3. Whale Shark | IUCN

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