

## 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](#)