



This year is moving along rapidly. We are already entering the fourth quarter of 2008. Thanks to the many efforts of WSORC's members, interns, volunteers and staff this last quarter has proved to be very eventful. Some of the many events that have occurred include the trip to the International Whale Shark Conference in Holbox, Mexico, the annual carnival and parade, beach cleanup at Sandy Bay and the great number of whale shark sightings in the months of July, August and not so much in September.

It is always a pleasure to thank all of those that make WSORC successful. WSORC is fortunate to have the best group of volunteers and interns that greatly enhance our ability to fulfill our mission and make possible all the research and educational programs. As always we are looking for new volunteers to come and work in the office, maintain the retail center, man our whale shark encounter boats and assist in a variety of ways with ongoing research projects. If you are interested in volunteering please review our web site [wsorc.com](http://wsorc.com) or contact Dr. Rob at [rob@wsorc.com](mailto:rob@wsorc.com).



Pictured: top Kat and Lindsey WSORC dive masters, bottom Donna (Utila Lodge guest) and Kelly, WSORC research assistant on whale shark encounter boat.

## Lessons from Holbox

By Bryan Becker



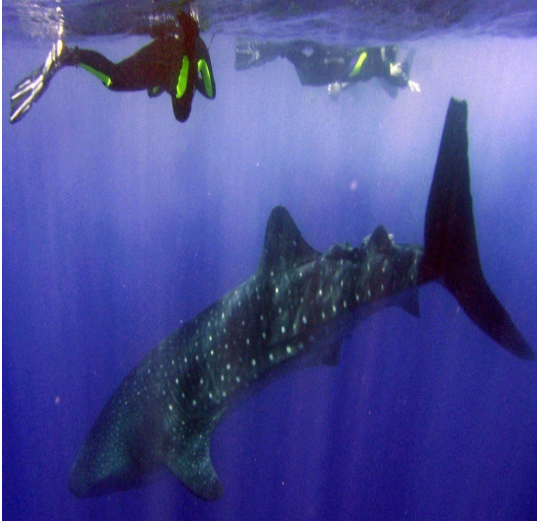
I have a greater appreciation for the animals which I have grown so fond of while living in Utila after coming back from the Second International Whale Shark Conference in Holbox, Mexico, last month. Whale shark researchers, ecotourism guides, and whale shark enthusiasts came from around the world for a week to exchange ideas, methods, and research regarding the world's biggest fish. As everyone presented their findings and experiences, both in front of the crowd and after hours, it became apparent that whale shark behavior, habitat, and encounters vary throughout the world. Holbox hosts hundreds, if not thousands, of whale sharks every summer. The predictability of whale shark sightings coupled with the sheer size of its aggregations and the beauty of the small island community itself has led to a thriving ecotourism economy based almost exclusively on encountering the whale sharks, creating an industry which earned 12 million dollars for the community last year alone.

As of this writing, the largest source of information on whale shark encounters for Utila, the public depository Ecocean database, only lists 269 reported whale shark encounters in Utila, and only 67 individually identified whale sharks. Between June and September, one could see that many individual whale sharks on a good day in Holbox. In comparison to other whale shark sighting destinations Utila's numbers sound unimpressive, but this is not to downplay the importance of whale sharks to Utila. Utila *is* on the short list of whale shark destinations; however, it is certainly not alone in playing host to these amazing visitors.

The low numbers here may actually contribute to our appreciation of them. Since we never know if we will see them, their appearance comes with an extra element of surprise, discovery, and excitement. While in many parts of the world whale sharks are hunted and killed for their fins, livers and meat, people protect them here in the Caribbean – in part because there are so few. As noted in Dan Cain's movie *Big Fish Utila*, it is the fishermen of Utila who understand and show Old Tom the most respect.

This is not to say that whale sharks are necessarily safe in the Caribbean, either. Even though they are not fished, they are still at risk from human activity, particularly in areas where there is a strong demand for whale shark sighting tourism. Irresponsible encounter behavior can injure whale sharks with boat collisions and propeller wounds. We frequently see whale sharks with propeller scars on their

tail fins here, and it's not rare to see paint flecks on their backs from the hulls of boats.



The behavior of swimmers in the water and the boats that carry them can potentially influence the feeding patterns of the whale sharks as well. The sharks come to Utila's waters to feed at the surface where we find them in "boils" of black fin tuna, bait fish and, plankton. The water here is much clearer than in Holbox owing to the smaller concentrations of food, and we find them in water that is typically 1000 feet deep or more. Splashing, touching, swimming in front of them, free diving around the sharks and flash photography can scare whale sharks away from the surface and interrupt their feeding. Enough stress in one area could encourage an animal to find somewhere else to eat, far enough away that the humans can't get to it. The whale shark encounter guidelines promoted by WSORC and endorsed by the Honduras

government are based on the Australian guidelines and are similar to, though not as strict as, those used in Holbox. Following the guidelines helps minimize the negative effects of human interaction with whale sharks.

The low numbers of whale shark sightings in Utila also inspire a lot of interest from the international



research community. Utila is especially intriguing, not only because there is not much data from here, but also because there are sightings year round. Most of the current international research on whale sharks focuses on population and migration patterns.

Utila is a lucky place with the opportunity to see whale sharks every month of the year, in very clear water, and this year so far has had at least one shark every month since December.

## Utila Carnival and Parade (July 19 – 26, 2008)

The annual Utila Carnival and Parade provided a lot of excitement and fun again this year. The carnival week was from July 19<sup>th</sup> through July 26<sup>th</sup>. Our own Kelly Goodale (WSORC research assistant) was crowned Miss Playa this year. The Honduran Naval Academy provided escorts for all the ladies of the Royal Court. The parade held on Saturday



included many floats and bands from the local schools and environmental associations. We would like to thank all the volunteers that assisted and helped in building the whale shark float that WSORC entered in the

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## Beach Cleanup Day Aug 31 2008

On Sunday, August 31, 12 volunteers and staff of WSORC, The Iguana Station and UCME got together on Sandy Bay Beach; just on the other side of Chepes Beach, and filled PADI issued garbage bags. We would like to thank PADI for providing the beach cleanup kit. This kit included: eight 20 gallon mesh trash bags, fifteen 20 gallon plastic trash bags, Project Aware stickers, seafood watch handouts, a beautiful Year of the Reef poster. Certificates for those that helped with the beach cleanup and associated activities were also provided.

We were actually able to fill them all, and without having to cover much ground at all. A couple of neighborhood children came by and pitched in for a little while as well. Nadia from the Municipal Environmental Unit (UMA) and the municipality provided the pickup truck for removing the trash to the Utila dump site.

parade. The float was carried by local school children and volunteers.



After many attempts to find the right blue coloring to dye the fabric of the whale shark float and a lot of stained blue hands we finally got the color somewhat right. A bluish-brown whale shark emerged. This was great fun and all that participated said it was a great idea and that we can improve upon our design for next year's carnival.

As opposed to the Earth Day clean up we helped sponsor at Big Bight, this time we were in the bay, meaning that much of the trash came from Utila. Most obvious in the trash were the thousands of plastic drinking straws.

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## **Big Jim Memorial**

April 28, 2008 marked the one-year anniversary of the passing of Jim Engel. Big Jim was one of the co-founders of WSORC along with his wife, and current president of WSORC, Kisty Engel. Jim had many visions as to what he wanted WSORC to become.

We hope that he is pleased with what we are doing, and how WSORC has evolved.

**WSORC is announcing the Big Jim Memorial Adoption fund.** Whale Shark #U629, "Big Jim" was adopted and named for Jim Engel. This fund will be used to provide funding for whale shark migration patterning, tagging and tissue sample research. The primary use of this memorial fund will be to support the deployment of two or more satellite tags. These tags cost approximately \$4,500 a piece, plus satellite time.

Please help in this effort by adopting the whale shark "Big Jim" again in memory of Jim Engel. You can donate to the Big Jim Memorial Fund directly, or by co-adopting U629 with others.

To adopt, visit our web site at [www.wsorc.com](http://www.wsorc.com) and view our adoption page. Make sure you use "Big Jim" in the name of the whale shark you are adopting, and the tag number U629.

Frank and Paige Krekeler from Houston, Texas are the proud new parents of an adopted whale shark. The Krekelers adopted Big Jim. Thank you for your support and contribution Frank and Paige.

Thank you for supporting WSORC and recognizing Jim Engel in this memorial effort. If you have questions, please write Dr. Rob Davis at [Rob@wsorc.com](mailto:Rob@wsorc.com) or [info@wsorc.com](mailto:info@wsorc.com). Donations can be sent directly to Jim Engel Memorial Fund, WSORC c/o Roatan Charters, P.O. 877, San Antonio, FL 33576.

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## What is Up with August?

The third quarter of 2008 provided some unusual sightings for this time of year. WSORC had a total of 11 whale shark encounter trips during the third quarter. Sightings for July were meager, but holy cow was the month of August a thriller.

We encounter eighteen different whale sharks during the month of August. This is an all time record for the month. Our data base indicates that we rarely encounter whale sharks during August. On a number of days we encountered multiple whale sharks in more than one location. We had at least three encounters with more than one whale shark in the "boil".

September has provided two whale sharks of which one was a new encounter.

We did however have an unusual day September 24, 2008. This encounter trip not only found friendly spinner dolphins that actually stayed around for snorkelers to get in the

water and observe their frolicking behavior, but produced the first recorded sighting of false killer whales (*Pseudorca crassidens*).



The false killer whale is a cetacean and a member of the oceanic dolphin family *Delphinidae*. Although they look and share many characteristics with the killer whale (Orca), they are not closely related.

## Little Kid Sees Big Fish

The afternoon of Friday August 8, 2008 provided the greatest thrill and excitement for young Toby Gabourel. Toby lives on Utila and had never seen a whale shark, let alone get in the water with one, actually three. This precocious nine went out onto the high seas to find a whale shark with Whale Shark and Oceanic Research Center's (WSORC) encounter boat.

The afternoon started like most other whale shark encounters. Which is to say, the boat had to be prepared and Toby jumped right in and assisted the crew in this preparation with the loading of water and glasses, first aid kit and his snorkel gear. Once the boat was loaded the Captain took us to search for Utila's most famous visitor, Old Tom.



As we headed southeast towards Black Hills Toby sat with me asking a myriad of questions. Most of Toby's questions were about the whale shark and the critter's behavior. This surprised me somewhat. I was expecting him to talk about the snorkeling adventure he was about to undertake and the deep blue waters that

he was about to enter. We discussed the way that we were to act with the whale shark once we found one and what expect when he entered the water with one. I explained why the whale shark encounter guidelines were established and said that he thought this was a good way to protect the whale shark.

We started our search for the world's largest known fish just southeast of Black Hills and slowly headed north towards Pumpkin Hill. Low and behold we found our first of three sharks this day due east of Pumpkin Hill. This whale shark was a juvenile approximately 12 feet long with undetermined sex. We were able to get two encounters with the first shark of the day before he became skittish and left.

Toby entered the water with an almost perfect whale shark encounter entry, nary a splash and proceeded to head the in the wrong direction. I caught up with him and turned him toward the whale shark. We caught up with the whale shark and followed him for a short time. Upon returning to the boat I asked Toby, "Did you see Him?" Trying to catch his breath he responded in the negative. He was so excited and also concerned about being in hundreds of feet of water, and focused more on swimming and breathing than looking for the whale shark.

We reloaded and got ready for our second jump with this animal. Toby was ready this time. He came right up alongside me as we watched the whale shark begin feeding in the boil. I was a little concerned because Toby zipped right on by me and I had to swim extra hard to catch up and stay with the youngster. When we returned to the boat this time he had the most beautiful heartwarming smile. Toby had seen his first whale shark! His confidence assured Toby made eight more jumps with the second and third whale shark of the day in three different locations. These two guys were approximately eighteen and twenty-two feet long. Finding the whale sharks was easy; the boils were greater than a hundred meters at times, with thousands of birds overhead. We encountered both of the larger whale sharks off Pumpkin Hill anywhere from 1 mile to 2.5 miles east northeast from shore. After a long day of whale shark snorkeling we headed towards home. I look down from the flying bridge to find young Toby soundly sleeping on the Neptune's gunnels with the most incredible smile. Certainly a day this youngster will never forget.

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### **Summer Camp – Educational Programs**

WSORC has developed a program to provide an exciting and innovative approach for hands-on and interactive marine education opportunities for students from around the world, including in the water and laboratory activities. Our goal is to provide students with a thorough indoctrination into the enormous scope of marine life and ecological stewardship while encouraging participation, individual exploration and challenge at an active research facility.

WSORC will be offering courses throughout the year. Plan early and reserve soon as we expect these sessions to fill up quickly.

Dr. Bonnie Avery from the University of Mississippi will return to Utila to continue her pharmacology research on Utila's reefs during the first part of

December. Dr. Bonnie's research is directed at finding sources for cancer cures from our reefs and oceans.

Ella Dowell will be here July 1-13, 2008 with her group from Penn State, Harrisburg. This is an eleven-day exploration of coral reefs, whale sharks and ocean life, mangroves, island flora and fauna, and wildlife in Utila.

We are excited about another new WSORC program that will announce at DEMA this year in Las Vegas. This program will provide a one week whale shark encounter week that includes whale shark Biology and Ecology, Honduras and the world protocol for whale sharking, the opportunity to learn how to tag and take tissue and DNA samples and of course the opportunity to swim with world's largest known fish.

## **Scientific/Research**

### **Tegucigalpa Policy Meetings**

WSORC is proud to announce that they have completed the training manual for whale shark encounters. The manual is now being translated from English to Spanish and will be reviewed by the Policy group at their next meeting. Dr. Rob Davis wrote the manual with an exceptional amount of assistance and help from the world wide whale shark community. Thanks to all of those that assisted in this project. The manual provides for the training of tour guides, boat captains, dive masters and crews for whale shark encounter tours.

This effort was initiated by the Honduran government with assistance from many of the Government Ministries and

environmental organizations interest in the preservation of whale sharks.

The manual includes the following: Introduction, Biology / Ecology, Potential Tourism Impacts on Whale Sharks, Why Encounter Protocol is especially important for whale sharks, Whale Shark Encounter Policy, Whale Shark Encounter Guidelines, Code of Conduct for Swimming with Whale Sharks in Honduras, Description of Encounter Zones, Why the Guidelines Were Established, Putting the Encounter Protocol to Practice, Log Books, Some key points to consider when completing the whale shark log book, *Code of Practice for Ecotourism Operators*, Whale Shark Encounter Boat, Briefing, Sample Boat Roster, Whale Shark Encounter Form, Whale Shark Behavior, Whale Shark Encounter Equipment Checklist, and the PADI Whale Shark Awareness Specialty Course.

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