



Engaging international communities for whale shark conservation

Brad Norman's new funding support through a Rolex Award for Enterprise is enabling him to put his vision for localised whale shark conservation into practice around the globe.

Winning a Rolex Award last year (see *Ecos* 133) was when it hit Australian marine scientist Brad Norman that he could finally turn his long-held dream of working to assure the future for whale sharks into practical reality. But he may not have been expecting such quick progress.

'It was fantastic to get a massive vote of confidence from experts who were reviewing this project against thousands of others from all over the world. Importantly, the encouragement to "go for what you believe in" and to keep pushing forward despite limited resources has been a great driver to make this project go to the next level,' he said recently from Western Australia.

'As a scientist, it was recognition and acceptance for the science upon which the

Whale sharks, the world's largest fish, are under threat before much at all is known about their distribution and behaviour.

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'I firmly believe that the ultimate outcome from increased understanding of whale shark numbers, distribution and their preferred habitats will be saving this species from extinction.'

project is based. As a conservationist, it has enabled my team to ensure success in a project that will ultimately assist with the long-term preservation of this threatened species.'

In just over eight months after receiving his US\$100 000 funding with four other international laureates at a gala ceremony in Singapore, Norman's project profile has been turbo-charged and he is receiving unprecedented support from many quarters.

Immediately after the awards, the ECOCEAN Whale Shark Photo-identification Library began to receive enquiries and submissions of whale shark sightings from across the globe. Already, the number of submissions to the Library has increased to over 3000 – from people seeing sharks in 37 different countries.

'The huge level of media coverage from the Award has enabled us to engage thousands of people around the world to work with us for the conservation of the

whale shark in a broader community based conservation project,' he said.

'The United Nations Environment Program's (UNEP) "Regional Seas" has now also agreed to support our project and help with its implementation via the international UNEP offices.'

Norman's award money is being directed to expanding the capacity of the global database and to enabling travel to countries where whale sharks are sighted, in order to train local stakeholders in the use of the ECOCEAN Library. This builds 'local ownership' and sub-libraries from each country – while populating the global database – and establishes deeper understanding about the worldwide status of the threatened whale sharks. Equipment and educational materials are also being provided to stakeholders in these countries.

'The interest and uptake by laypersons throughout the world is particularly exciting,' Norman said. 'We have been able to engage hundreds of community based "research assistants" that are so beneficial to the project. It has created its own domino effect: as people get to know about whale sharks and realise that they can assist with their future conservation simply through the collection and submission¹ of simple sighting information and photos, they gain a real sense of empowerment in a worthy conservation project.'

Every person who submits an entry to the ECOCEAN Library receives an automatic email every time 'their' shark is ever resighted. This cross-connection between the modern power of IT with conservation priorities is particularly compelling. Participants feel immediately connected to the cause, and then confident in telling other people about the work – this in turn encourages great interest from people who otherwise may not have appreciated the beauty and the fragility of the biggest fish in the sea.

Norman says that because the ECOCEAN Library is receiving such a range of whale shark sightings from all over the world, some submissions have included rare photos of large females with enlarged bellies – possibly pregnant females.

'This is particularly exciting as we are hoping, via this project, to identify breeding areas for whale sharks – presently unconfirmed – and encourage protection for these critical habitats as required.'

Whale shark ecotourism, provided

it is well managed, can have a positive impact on the conservation of the species and the economy of the local region. The Australian marine scientist has been particularly touched by the extraordinary enthusiasm for whale shark conservation being shown by developing communities where the majestic fish have been under particular threat.

He has just returned from a tiny village (Donsol) in the Philippines where whale sharks are found in large numbers. Supported by Rolex, and working with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF Philippines and Denmark), Norman's small team has been able to successfully introduce the ECOCEAN program into this location.

'One of the local Butanding Information Officers (BIOs) ['butanding' is the name for whale sharks in the



Left: Brad Norman discusses recent shark sightings with a village head in Thailand. Right: Recent Philippines research recruit, Embet, watches for sharks. ECOCEAN/WWF Denmark

Philippines] has stepped up and is collecting photos for ECOCEAN on a daily basis. His name is Embet Guadamor and he is a local villager from this poor region of rural Philippines. He has totally embraced the whale shark conservation initiative,' Norman said.

'We have had really positive discussions about the work being undertaken for whale sharks in the Philippines, and throughout the world, and I have asked him to organise his passport as I hope to facilitate an exchange between him and a whale shark stakeholder at another location we plan to visit as part of the Rolex program. Embet tells me, however, that locating a birth certificate may pose a problem!'

Norman said he is now 'really ramping up the project'. The uptake around the globe is increasing on a daily basis, and he has just committed to train local stakeholders in a minimum of 20 countries

over the next two years.

'Already we have established "ECOCEAN nodes" in Thailand, Mozambique, Australia, the Philippines, Honduras, Mexico and Belize, with the Seychelles and Tanzania coming onboard soon.'

'As an example of how this collaborative project can work on an international scale, through the efforts of our field operatives in Belize, Mexico and Honduras, we have already been able to confirm the movement of at least two sharks across these jurisdictions,' he highlights.

'We are keen to expand the project and increase the outreach – which requires additional support, hence we are looking to companies in Australia to join this successful project, especially at this early stage.'

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outcome from increased understanding of whale shark numbers, distribution and their preferred habitats will be saving this species from extinction.'

This conviction has already taken Norman's vision far, but substantial on-the-ground results are already manifesting. Earlier this month, helped by discussions with the ECOCEAN team, Taiwan – the only remaining country where whale sharks are legally hunted – announced that it would be banning whale shark fishing.

The recognition is growing too: on 8 May the ECOCEAN Library won the prestigious Peter Benchley Award for international shark conservation.

● James Porteous

More information:
ECOCEAN: www.ecocean.org

¹ Submitted to www.whaleshark.org