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Whale sharks surprise scuba divers in Lankayan waters



The slow-moving and filter-feeding sharks were sighted at a reef, 2.5km away from Pulau Langkayan off Sandakan. -NSTP/Courtesy of Reef Guardian/Davies Austin Spiji

By **Avila Geraldine** (</authors/avila-geraldine>)
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KOTA KINABALU: A recent diving trip turned extra special for a group of divers near Pulau Lankayan off Sandakan when they received a surprise visit from two protected juvenile whale sharks.

The slow-moving and filter-feeding sharks were sighted at a reef, 2.5km away from the island. The pair appeared around midday on Aug 11 when seven scuba divers were on a leisure dive.

Their presence brought the total number of whale shark sightings at Lankayan to seven this year. The surprise encounter was also documented on video and shared on Reef Guardian's Facebook page.

The 56-second footage shows a lone whale shark swimming near a boat, just below the surface.

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Reef Guardian representative Davies Austin Spiji, said the weather was bright and sunny while the waves were a slightly choppy at the time of the sighting.

"The sharks were first sighted by the dive centre team of Lankayan Island Dive Resort. They then informed us (Reef Guardian) about the encounter but by the time we got there, we only sighted one. It circled around our boat.



A recent sighting of whale shark in waters near Pulau Langkayan off Sandakan. -NSTP/Courtesy of Reef Guardian/Davies Austin Spiji

"The other shark descended into deeper waters following the bubbles produced by scuba divers as they dived around the reef," he said, adding the sharks were about 3.5m long.

Spiji said planktons were present within the area, but he could not be sure whether there was an abundance of them.

He, however, noted the sharks were not seen to be feeding at that time but there were suspended particles in the water column around Lankayan.

This, he said, could either be sand, silt, algae, plankton or a mixture of them.

The encounter was also reported by Reef Guardian to Wildbook for Whale Sharks at <https://www.whaleshark.org> (<https://www.whaleshark.org>), which is a site that collects data from the public to assist researchers in whale shark study.

Reef Guardian is a non-profit company appointed by the state government in 2004 to manage Sugud Islands Marine Conservation Area (SIMCA), with close cooperation from the Sabah Wildlife Department.

Lankayan, which is described as a tiny jewel-shaped island surrounded by coral reefs, is part of the conservation area.

According to Spiji, whale shark sightings in Lankayan waters is generally rare and from the records, it is usually sighted between March and July.

"As of Aug 14, this year, seven sightings have been recorded. There are two whale shark sightings in April, but we believed it to be the same shark, which appears to be about 4.5m in length.

"Five sightings, including the recent encounter, were reported this month. The shark in the first sighting (in August) was estimated to be eight metres long and it had appeared to be feeding some krills," he said.

Most sightings were reported to Reef Guardian by the dive centre team when they conducted recreational activities with diving tourists. Last year, there was only one reported sighting in Lankayan waters which was in June.

Prior to that, the last sighting was recorded in May 2014.

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Meanwhile, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) marine expert Dr Mabel Manjaji Matsumoto said whale sharks appear in Sabah waters all year long but reports of sightings were lacking before as there was no social media platform to disseminate information.

Matsumoto, who headed the Endangered Marine Species Research Unit of UMS's Borneo Marine Research Institute, said the unit collaborates with the Philippine's Large Marine Vertebrates Research Institute executive director Dr Gonzalo Araujo on whale sharks in Sabah.

She said that Araujo's tagging research showed that whale sharks swam down all the way to Semporna from Palawan in the Philippines, where the tagging was conducted.

In Malaysia, whale sharks are listed as threatened under the Fisheries (Control of Endangered Species of Fish) Regulations 1999, Fisheries Act 1985.

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