

A first instance of whale shark caught in *Dol* net and rescued in live condition at Gorai- Malvani, Maharashtra

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The history of various records of whale shark from coastal waters of India has been compiled by Prater (*J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.*, 42:255-279, 1941), Silas (*Mar. Fish. Infor. Serv. T&E Ser.*, No.66,1986), Pravin (*Curr. Sci.*, 9(3), 2000)), Hanfee (TRAFFIC, 2001) and Venkatesan *et. al.* (*Mar. Fish. Infor. Serv. T & E Ser.*, No.198, 2008). In Maharashtra *Dol* (bag) net operations are widespread but there are no reports on the landing of whale shark by this gear. However, the capture of whale shark has been reported in bag net at Kaveripattinam in Tamil Nadu (*Mar. Fish. Infor. Serv. T & E Ser.* No.145, 1996). In the present communication the author who is a

fisherman himself, has recorded his experiences in the light of age old practice to rescue whale sharks as and when they are caught in fishing gears by fishermen from Maharashtra who respect this fish like a God and worshipfully call it as “Deo Mushi”.

The first observation of *Rhincodon typus* that was rescued live from *Dol* net on October 21st, 2015 is given here. A male whale shark, about 6.5 m in length incidentally entered the *Dol* net at 30 m depth off Gorai-Malvani region, Mumbai. The net was hauled after about four hours with the help of a winch. At that time fishermen noticed a huge live

fish trapped in the cod end of the net. Fishermen endeavoured vigorously to pull the cod end parallel to the boat to release it from the net. Due to the lashing movement of its tail, strong tidal current and wave action, it took more than an hour to set the whale shark free by cutting the cod end of 2 mm twine with a knife (Fig. 1). Fishermen were not aware of the time at which the fish entered the net.



Fig. 1. The cod end being cut open to release the whale shark

On 29th October 2015, one more whale shark, with an approximate length of 4 m and weight of 2 tonnes (t) was caught in *Dol* net at the depth of 35 m off Madh Island, Mumbai. The net was hauled along with the fish on the deck by winch. The fish was removed from the net and kept at the side on deck. To ensure that it should not entangled or caught again in any nets, all the nets in the vicinity were hauled within an hour. The fish was released into the sea in live condition (Fig. 2). Gupta *et al* (*Mar. Fish. Infor. Serv. T & E Ser. No.110, 1991*) had observed lashing movements of whale shark for about two hours after being landed on the beach which indicate that this whale shark released live would also have strong chances of survival subsequently. The fishermen along Maharashtra appeared to be conscious of the need to protect whale sharks and their role in maintaining the ecological balance of the seas.

An incidental catch of whale shark in a multiday trawler operating at 45 m depth off Dabhol-Harney region, Maharashtra was also observed. The female



Fig. 2. Whale shark released from the deck of *dol* net boat back to the sea using winch

whale shark of 4.7 m in total length and weighing 1.7 t was brought to the Versova Landing Centre on 11.5.2015. However, there were no bidders for the fish and the carcass was once again loaded on the trawler and disposed into the sea. The trawl owner thus incurred a loss of about ₹ 12000/- towards damage of mast, net and labour charges for to and fro transport.

A number of fishermen were interviewed to understand the occurrence of whale sharks in the fishing areas. They opined that the species is now rarely seen in fishing grounds. Nowadays when a whale shark enters the net, they are generally released back in live condition by fishermen. When whale sharks get accidentally caught in the trawl net, fishermen immediately sense the sudden reduction in speed of boat. On entering the net, the whale sharks remain immobilized with pectoral fins bent towards the belly, and upper caudal lobe bending either side. The fishermen then haul up the net with the help of winch, cut the cod end of net manually by knife and release the fish as this species is protected by schedule 1 of Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, whereby its catch and marketing is prohibited. Only fishermen who are unaware of this bring the fish to the shore and subsequently have to take the carcass back to the sea incurring financial loss. Hence such fishermen also need to be made aware on the protected status of whale sharks with the help of posters and leaflets in local languages.