

Whale Shark

The whale shark is easy to identify because of its wide, flat head, the "checkerboard" pattern of white dots and lines on its dark blue-gray or brown-gray skin... and its size. It is the largest of all sharks, and the biggest fish in the world. An adult whale shark can be longer than a school bus, but there is nothing to fear: this polka-dotted carpet shark is a gentle giant.

The arrangement of spots and stripes on a whale shark's body blends into the pattern of light sparkling on the water's surface, making it harder to spot from above.

A whale shark's skin can be more than 4 inches (10 centimeters) thick.

Small food for big fish

Because its food is very small, the whale shark must eat a lot of it. It spends over eight hours feeding every day, and travels thousands of miles each year following its food around the oceans.

Researchers believe that whale sharks can live from 60 to 100 years. A whale shark that lives to be 100 will have filtered almost 400 million gallons (1.5 billion liters) of seawater in its lifetime.

Did you know?
Just like fingerprints, the pattern of lines and dots on the skin of each whale shark is unique. Researchers use these patterns to identify individual whales.

Whale sharks have a layer of dermal denticles covering their eyeballs. This helps protect their eyes from being scratched. Whale sharks can also pull their eyeballs deep into their heads.

A whale shark's jaws can open more than 5 feet (1.5 meters) wide. Even though they are filter feeders, whale sharks have more than 300 rows of tiny teeth.

A whale shark's mouth, filters, and gills make up almost one third of its total body length.

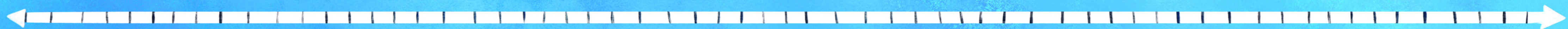
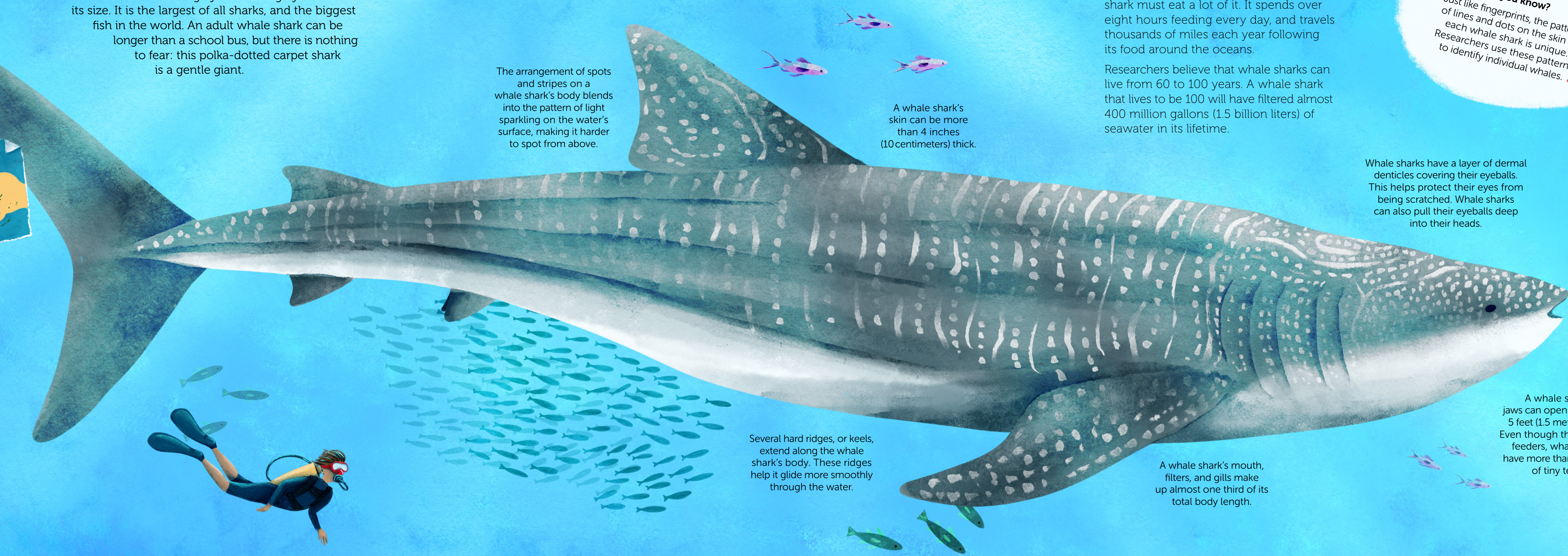
Several hard ridges, or keels, extend along the whale shark's body. These ridges help it glide more smoothly through the water.



This is where whale sharks have been found around the world

Filter feeding

The whale shark lives in the warm waters of tropical oceans around the world. It feeds on creatures such as small plants, fish, and squid. It swims along slowly with its mouth open or hangs tail-down in the water and opens and closes its mouth to gulp in mouthfuls of water filled with its prey. The whale shark swallows its prey while the water flows back out through its gills. This is called filter feeding, and you can read more about it on page 41.



Length: 40 feet (12 meters)
Mass: 15 tons (14 tonnes)