

GEORGIA AQUARIUM ANIMAL FACT SHEET

Blacktip reef shark

Carcharhinus melanopterus

Range/Habitat

- The blacktip reef shark is found in the Indo-Pacific from the Red Sea and East Africa to the Hawaiian Islands to French Polynesia. It also has moved into the eastern Mediterranean through the Suez Canal.
- It prefers shallow waters inshore on coral reefs, in the intertidal zone (reef flats), and near reef drop-offs. It is also found in mangrove areas, moving in and out with the tide and has been observed in fresh water, but not in tropical lakes and rivers far from the sea.
- The species is usually found in depths 65 to 246 feet (20 –75 m).

Physical Characteristics

- The blacktip reef shark averages just over 5 feet (160 cm).
- The maximum recorded weight is 30 lbs (13.6 kg).
- The species can be distinguished from other sharks by its black-tipped fins.
- It has horizontally oval eyes and a short, bluntly rounded snout.
- The blacktip reef shark is gray-brown on the upper body and white below, which is an example of counter-shading. This pattern provides camouflage from two directions - looking up at it against the sunlit surface and looking down at it against the darker sea bottom.
- The prominent black tip on the first dorsal fin stands out against the light band below it.
- It also has a conspicuous white band on its flanks, which extends rearward to its pelvic fins.

Diet/Feeding

- The blacktip reef shark prefers fish, but also feeds on crustaceans, cephalopods and other mollusks.
- It preys on the abundant fish that live on the reef mostly consisting of surgeonfish and mullet. It also eats land snakes it finds in the mangroves.

Conservation Status

- The blacktip reef shark is listed as “lower risk,” on the IUCN Red List, meaning there is need for concern.

Additional Information

- The blacktip reef shark is not to be confused with the blacktip shark, which is a different species.
- The species is found singly or in small groups.
- The female produces two to four pups, measuring 1.5 to 1.7 feet (46 - 52 cm), after a 16 month gestation period,
- It cruises in very shallow water with its dorsal (top) fin often extending above the surface. It has been known at times to jump completely out of the water while in the shallows.
- The blacktip reef shark may become aggressive and has been implicated in attacks on people wading in shallow water while carrying speared fish.

- Although it is not currently listed by IUCN as vulnerable or endangered, the blacktip reef shark is regularly caught by inshore fisheries and is vulnerable to depletion because of its small litter sizes and long gestation periods. Its fins are valued for shark-fin soup and the liver as source of oil.
- The blacktip reef shark feeds on smaller reef fishes, as well as octopus and crustaceans (crabs and lobsters). It has long, thin, triangular serrated teeth, which help in eating reef fish. The shark's teeth are only loosely attached to its jaws, so it may lose or break teeth as it feeds. The teeth are located in rows, which rotate into use as needed. The first two rows are used in holding its prey. As teeth are lost, broken, or worn down, they are replaced by new teeth that rotate into place.
- As with some other shark species, the blacktip reef shark's mouth is located on the underside of its head and the jaws fold up and out of the way when the shark is swimming, a design that contributes to its streamlining. When feeding, the jaws open downward and outward, protruding slightly to more easily grasp its prey.

Sources

Sharks and Rays. Hennemann, Ralf M., pg. 144

The Shark Almanac. Allen, Thomas B., pgs. 101, 102