

Sabah varsity students, conservation group gather data on whale sharks

By [Olivia Miwil](#) - May 27, 2020 @ 12:09am



This 4.5m long juvenile male whale shark, MY-065, was first identified by the team from UMS off Gaya Island, KK on 13 March 2020. - Pic courtesy of Scuba Junkies

KOTA KINABALU: A group of marine students and a local conservation organisation have been making use of the Movement Control Order (MCO) period to build a database on whale sharks in the country.

Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) Borneo Marine Research Institute's Associate Professor Dr Mabel Manjaji Matsumoto said the MCO had prevented students and researchers from carrying out some projects, particularly those conducted in the outdoors.

"But it has also provided us with unique opportunities to develop others, such as gathering citizen science data on social media like this. So far, four individual whale sharks have been identified during the MCO.

"However, we need help to find more individuals. We are asking divers and snorkelers with footage of whale sharks to tag our project (@MalaysiaWhalesharks) on their social media posts," she said in a statement, adding that those interested can also upload images and footage directly to <https://www.whaleshark.org/>, an online library for global whale shark sightings.

The UMS students managed to record and identify their first official whale shark of the project during a survey in early March before the MCO.

After that, they conducted reviews on social media posts to tag images and footage of whale sharks and upload them to the Wildbook.

The project is also helped by S.E.A.S (Sea Education Awareness Sabah), which has been assisting the group by reviewing old images and video, and tagging the Malaysia Whale Shark project.

Its conservation manager, David McCann, said whale sharks are one of the species divers are thrilled to catch on camera, being incredibly enigmatic megafauna, threatened with extinction and increasingly rare to see.

"The recent MCO enabled us to go back through our old footage on social media and tag whale sharks. We had a huge backlog.

"There are thousands of dives at sites in the Semporna region, including Sipadan, Mabul, Kapalai and the islands of the Tun Sakaran Marine Park," said McCann, who is based at Scuba Junkies' Mabul beach resort in Semporna.

An update on this work will be provided at the Sabah Shark and Ray forum, which is expected to be held next year.