

Nurse Shark

(*Ginglymostoma cirratum*)

Habitat and Distribution: Found in the Atlantic Ocean from Rhode Island to Brazil and in the Pacific Ocean from the Gulf of California to Ecuador. They inhabit reefs in inshore shallow tropical waters, bays, and estuaries.

Size: Up to 14 feet in length; up to about 400 pounds

Wild Diet: Small fish, crab, lobster, shrimp, octopus, squid, and sea urchins

Predators: Humans

Lifespan: Unknown

Reproduction: Breeding season appears to be year-round. Nurse sharks are ovoviviparous (eggs develop and hatch in the mother's body and young are born live) and give birth to about 25 12-inch pups. Sexual maturity occurs at about 5 feet in length. During courtship, the male turns a darker brown than the female. Courting pairs show slow parallel swimming behavior.

Sharks in general reproduce slowly, bear few young at a time, have a long gestation period, and many swim great distances to find a mate. That's why it takes years for their populations to rebound after a serious decline from overfishing.

Behavior: Nurse sharks are sluggish bottom dwellers and feeders. The mouth is used like a vacuum to suck prey out of crevices. They are docile by nature and are non-aggressive unless disturbed. They are mostly nocturnal and rest piled on top of each other in caves and on reefs. Nurse sharks are often found in groups of 20–30 individuals.

Conservation Connection:

Status: Secure. The nurse shark is not widely commercially fished, but because it is slow-moving it is an easy target for local fisheries. Its skin is exceptionally tough and is prized for leather.

Interesting Facts: Two nasal barbels (look like fleshy whiskers) are found near the mouth to help them feel around for prey on the reefs and the sandy ocean floor. They are grayish to yellowish brown in color, and can change colors to match their surroundings.

