



Nurse shark *Nebrius ferrugineus* in northern Chagos

The Nurse shark

There are over 15 species of sharks in Chagos waters, and the Nurse shark (*Nebrius ferrugineus*) is one of the most common¹. Mainly a nocturnal feeder, its diet consists of bottom dwelling molluscs, crabs, octopus, urchins and rays. In the day it is mainly seen resting on sandy patches on reefs in aggregations of up to several dozen, and several large 'families' are known to have been consistently resident in parts of Chagos for several decades. It can sleep motionless because it is one of the relatively few shark species which can force water over its gills without continuously swimming.

It commonly exceeds 3 metres in length, and gives birth to live young because its eggs are retained inside the female until hatching time, when the young are about 30cm long. It is docile, but severe bites with its relatively small mouth have been recorded if it is harassed.

It occurs in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (the Caribbean Nurse Shark is a different species). Like many sharks it is caught and used sometimes for food but also for its 'sandpaper' skin. Because of their large resting aggregations, large schools are easily caught (so the location of this group, part of a resident population in northern Chagos, is not disclosed).

¹ Winterbottom R. and Anderson R.C. 1999. Fishes of the Chagos Archipelago. In: Sheppard C.R.C. and Seaward M. (eds). Ecology of the Chagos Archipelago. Linnean Society London, pp101-118.

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