

CONSERVATION ACTION SERIES 20260818

GUARDIANS OF THE GENTLE GIANTS

A TRIBUTE TO KERALA'S WHALE SHARK RESCUERS

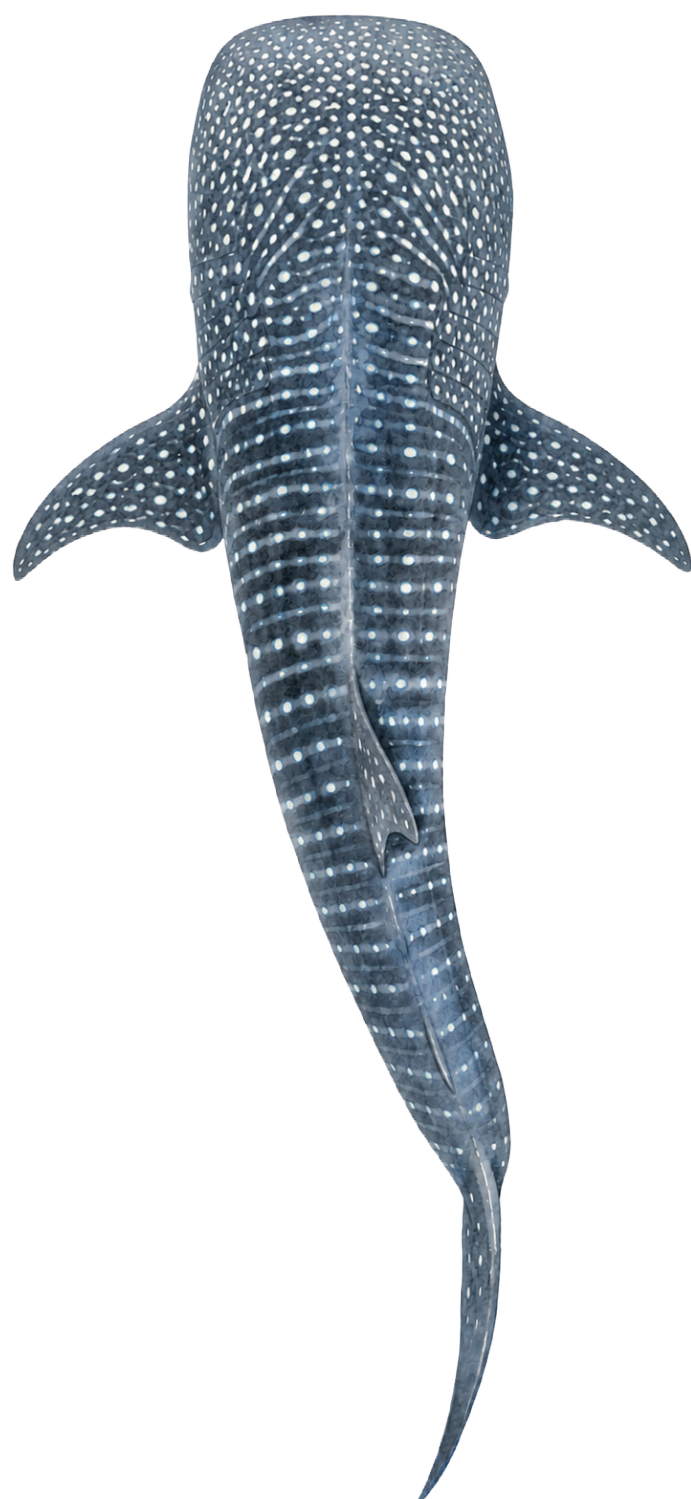




Kerala Forests is a department of the Government of Kerala responsible for forestry environmental and wildlife management in the state of Kerala, India. The department is involved with the protection and conservation of flora and fauna in their natural habitats and conserves 11,524.149 km² (4,449.499 sq mi) of forests forming 29.65% of the total geographic area of the state. Headquartered in Vazhuthacaud, Thiruvananthapuram, the department is headed by the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, serving as the Head of Forest Force.



The Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) is a leading wildlife conservation action institution, dedicated to protecting India's wildlife and their habitats. Founded in 1998, it works in partnership with local communities, IPOs and governments to manage emerging wildlife challenges, implement conservation strategies in protecting species and landscapes and work for the welfare of individual wild animals in distress. WTI strives to prevent and/or mitigate threats to the country's natural heritage through practical, on-ground solutions that drive meaningful and lasting conservation impact.



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Preface

As a Malayali, I have always felt a profound connection with the sea. The Arabian Sea has shaped not only the state's economy and culture but also the identity of generations of coastal communities. Among the remarkable marine species that inhabit these waters, the whale shark known locally as Pulli Sravu or Thimingala Sravu, holds a special place. As the world's largest fish, it is a gentle giant that reminds us that the health of our oceans is inseparable from our own future.

More than two decades ago, the whale shark faced an uncertain future along India's coastline. Once hunted extensively, the species was rapidly disappearing from our seas. Recognising the urgency, the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), in partnership with the Gujarat Forest Department, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), Tata Chemicals, and several committed partners, initiated one of India's earliest marine conservation movements. Our collective efforts resulted in the whale shark receiving the highest level of legal protection under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, and contributed to its inclusion under Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

However, conservation cannot succeed through legislation alone. It succeeds when people become custodians of nature.

What began as a pioneering initiative in Gujarat gradually evolved into a pan-India whale shark conservation programme, expanding to Kerala, Lakshadweep, and more recently Goa. The decision to extend the programme to Kerala was guided by science. A review of available literature, including the work of Akhilesh et al. (2012), indicated that whale shark landings and strandings in India were reported predominantly from the Kerala coast. This trend is closely linked to the state's fishing practices, as many fishermen from Kerala operate in the productive waters around Lakshadweep, where incidental encounters with whale sharks are relatively common.

Recognising the ecological significance of this landscape, Wildlife Trust of India, with the support of Cochin Shipyard Limited, launched the Whale Shark Conservation Project across Kerala and Lakshadweep in 2017. Rather than

adopting a one-dimensional awareness campaign, we chose a holistic approach engaging fishers, Fisheries Cooperative Societies, harbour management committees, schools, local self-governments, faith-based institutions including the Church, the Fisheries Department, the Forest Department, and numerous community leaders. Conservation became a dialogue rather than a directive.

The results speak for themselves. In less than seven years of dedicated efforts in Kerala, 54 whale sharks have been successfully rescued and released from accidental entanglement in fishing nets. These rescues reaffirm Kerala's significance as one of India's most important landscapes for whale shark conservation. More importantly, they demonstrate that when communities are informed, empowered, and trusted, they become the strongest champions of conservation. This achievement would not have been possible without the unwavering support of the Kerala Forest Department, whose partnership has strengthened conservation action across the state through timely interventions and institutional commitment. I also extend my sincere appreciation to the Department of Animal Husbandry, whose veterinary officers have actively participated in capacity-building programmes, ensuring that rescue and response mechanisms continue to improve through scientific expertise and collaboration.

This dossier is, above all, a tribute to the true conservation heroes the fishermen whose courage, compassion, and selfless decisions have given these gentle giants a second chance at life. Time and again, they chose to sacrifice valuable fishing nets, precious time, and economic returns to ensure that an endangered animal returned safely to the sea. Their stories remind us that conservation is not driven solely by policies or institutions, but by ordinary people making extraordinary choices.

Each of the 54 rescues documented in these pages is more than a conservation success, it is a testament to trust built over years, partnerships nurtured through respect, and communities that have embraced stewardship of a species they once barely knew. Together, these stories chart Kerala's growing role in India's marine conservation journey and offer

hope for the future of our oceans.

I hope this dossier serves not only as a record of remarkable achievements but also as an inspiration for policymakers, researchers, conservation practitioners, and coastal communities across the country. May it encourage many more partnerships, many more rescues, and many more stories of coexistence ensuring that the Pulli Sravu continues to glide through Kerala's waters for generations to come.



Vivek Menon, FLS
Founder and Executive Director,
Wildlife Trust of India (WTI)



Art © Sayanti Basak

Message

The whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*), the world's largest fish, continues to be one of the least understood marine megafauna species in the northern Indian Ocean despite considerable advances in marine science over the past two decades. Along the southwest coast of India, particularly in the waters of Kerala and the Lakshadweep archipelago, recurring observations have indicated the ecological significance of this region. Scientific studies, including those undertaken through collaborations with the IUCN Species Survival Commission and the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI), have identified the Lakshadweep waters as an important aggregation area for the species. Simultaneously, records from fish landing centres along the Kerala coast have demonstrated that whale sharks, along with several other marine megafauna such as sea turtles and large rays, have historically remained vulnerable to accidental capture and mortality.

While official records of whale shark occurrences along the Kerala coast were relatively limited for many years, numerous undocumented incidents were known within fishing communities. These observations highlighted a critical gap between scientific documentation and traditional ecological knowledge, underscoring the need for systematic conservation interventions that actively involved coastal stakeholders.

Building upon the successful conservation model developed in Gujarat, the Wildlife Trust of India expanded the Whale Shark Conservation Project to Kerala in 2017 with generous support from Cochin Shipyard Limited, VMware, VST, and subsequently Oracle. The project sought not only to improve awareness among fishing communities but also to establish a responsive mechanism for reporting, rescuing, documenting, and safely releasing incidentally entangled whale sharks.

One of the defining moments of this initiative came in 2018, when the successful rescue and release of a whale shark from Malappuram attracted widespread media attention and public appreciation. The event demonstrated that conservation messages, when communicated effectively, can resonate

across both traditional fishing communities and the wider public, including Kerala's highly literate urban society. Since then, several successful rescue and release operations have reinforced Kerala's emerging role not merely as an ecologically important aggregation area but also as a state making tangible contributions towards the conservation of this globally Endangered species.

The achievements documented in this dossier represent far more than a compilation of rescue records. They reflect years of collaboration between scientists, government agencies, local communities, civil society, and corporate partners. Each rescue contributes valuable ecological information while simultaneously strengthening a culture of stewardship among coastal communities.

It is hoped that this publication will serve both as a scientific record and as a practical reference for future conservation efforts. More importantly, if it finds a place within fishing communities themselves, it has the potential to become a repository of shared knowledge that inspires future generations to value, protect, and conserve not only the whale shark but the rich marine biodiversity of India's coastline.



Prof. B. C. Choudhury
Principal Investigator
Whale Shark Conservation Project

From Hunters to Guardians

The Kerala coast has historically been an important whale shark landing centre, where encounters with gentle giants were a part of fishing operations and, in some instances, may have led to their commercial exploitation. The practice extended beyond Kerala, with fishers also venturing into the waters around the Lakshadweep Islands to target whale sharks.

A survey conducted by the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) revealed that while 59% of fishers were aware that the whale shark is a protected species, 82% had a perception about its legal status, and there was little intent to stop its exploitation. The findings called for a strategic, community-focused conservation campaign to address perceptions, build awareness, encourage the voluntary release of entangled whale sharks, and foster a broader sense of stewardship among the communities sharing the coastal waters with the species.

Based on these recommendations, WTI initiated the 'Whale Shark Conservation Project' along the Kerala coast in 2017, with support from multiple donors, including Cochin Shipyard and subsequently, VST, VMware and Oracle.

The campaign sought to raise awareness about the whale shark's protected status and ecological importance, change perceptions and attitudes towards the species, promote the safe and voluntary release of entangled whale sharks, strengthen the capacity of fishing communities and other stakeholders to respond to entanglements, and create a community-led conservation ethic for the species.

Then came a moment that changed the course of the conservation story.

On 14 October 2018, in Tanur, Malappuram, a group of fishers voluntarily released a whale shark after it became entangled in their fishing net. That moment marked a turning point. From that day on, the hunters turned into protectors. Fishers along the Kerala coast started voluntarily cutting their nets to free entangled whale sharks, accepting the loss of their catch and the cost of repairing their fishing gear.



Mr. Hamsa Koya and Mr. Dirar, who led the first whale shark rescue from Kerala, were felicitated by Dr. Rajeev Kumar Gupta IAS, (Additional Chief Secretary-Forests and Environment, Gujarat) and Mr. Prasad Menon, Chairman WTI (2016-2020) at the Whale Shark Conference India, 2019.



But releasing a whale shark is no easy act.

A whale shark can grow to nearly 40 feet and weigh several tonnes. When entangled, it struggles instinctively, thrashing against the net and making the rescue dangerous. Fishers must work in close proximity to an animal whose sheer size and strength can turn a rescue into a high-risk effort. Injuries during these rescues are not uncommon, with some fishers requiring medical attention.

There is also a very real economic cost. Cutting away a net can mean losing an entire day's catch, while repairing damaged fishing gear can keep a fisher out of the water for several more days. For families dependent on daily fishing income, this can be a significant sacrifice. Choosing to release a whale shark therefore requires more than awareness; it demands courage, compassion, and a willingness to place the life of the animal above an immediate economic loss.

Yet, time and again, fishers chose to do so.

Since then, **54 whale sharks**, across different size classes, have been voluntarily rescued and released along the Kerala coast.

The courage and compassion shown by these fishers have been widely appreciated by the media and the public in Kerala. Their actions have changed not only the fate of individual whale sharks, but also the conservation narrative along the coast.

WTI sought to recognise this extraordinary contribution to honour the fishers who chose to protect an animal that was once hunted and commercially exploited, and to pay a lasting tribute to those who helped change the course of whale shark conservation in Kerala.

This dossier is a testament to that effort.

It brings together, in the rescuers' own words, the stories of how this change took place their experiences, their choices, the

risks they faced and the sacrifices they made. It is intended to give readers a first-hand account of the people behind these 54 rescues, and of the transformation from hunters to guardians.

We hope this dossier becomes an heirloom for the families of these rescuers something that their children and future generations can look back on with pride, and perhaps draw inspiration from the conservation ethos of those who came before them.

A small, but lasting tribute to the Conservation Heroes who became the Guardians of the Gentle Giant along the Kerala coast.

The People Behind the Conservation

The Whale Shark Conservation Project started in 2017 in Kerala with the support of Cochin Shipyard. Central to these expansion efforts (from Gujarat) has been a robust survey approach to understand and address community perceptions, awareness levels, and attitudes towards whale shark conservation across India's coastal regions.

The project started along the entire coastal stretch of Kerala, reaching out to fishing communities, municipalities and coastal schools, and urging them to release entangled whale sharks. While the conservation movement in Gujarat had its own trajectory, in Kerala, one of the most essential movements of the project came from a single fisher who was moved by the awareness efforts and allowed that message to translate into a change in his own practice.

One day, along the Malappuram coast, a whale shark became entangled in a fishing net. Not long after the project had begun, the fisher made the decision to release the whale shark. His act became a diffuser move—a moment that demonstrated how awareness could translate into action, and how one individual's decision could begin to set a new norm: that every life caught in a net deserves a chance to be released.

The decision, however, did not come without a cost.

When fishers cut their nets to release a whale shark, they lose the catch they would otherwise have brought home that day. They may also lose several more days of income while the damaged net is repaired. In most cases, these fishers are the primary or only earning members of their families. Releasing a whale shark, therefore, is not an easy or simple decision. Cutting the nets of a shore seine or other fishing gear in Kerala can result in a significant financial loss, followed by further losses in the days required to repair the gear.

There is another dimension to this act of courage.

A whale shark, which can grow to nearly 40 feet and weigh several tonnes, can become highly agitated when entangled in a net. As an animal responding to its instinct for survival, it cannot understand whether the people around it are trying to help or harm it. It resists, thrashes and struggles to free itself. In many instances, fishers themselves have been injured while attempting to release the animal, with some requiring medical attention.

Wildlife Trust of India, along with the donors over the years have recognised and appreciated fishers who have undertaken these difficult rescues, offering a token amount in acknowledgement of their contribution towards conservation. But needless to say, this token amount can never truly equate to the economic loss, physical risk or effort involved.

The real driving force has been something much more powerful the willingness of these fishers to do something altruistic, even when it comes at a personal cost.

This is what makes the Kerala story so significant.

Over the last nine years, fishing communities along the Kerala coast have helped save 54 whale sharks. Each rescue represents more than the survival of an endangered species. It represents a decision made at sea, often in difficult circumstances, to put the life of an animal before an immediate economic loss.

The Pan India Whale Shark Conservation Project has grown from a conservation initiative focused on protecting one of the world's largest fish into a movement that seeks to build understanding, empathy and coexistence across India's coastal communities. From Gujarat, where the movement first took shape, to Kerala, Lakshadweep, Goa and other

coastal regions, the project has worked with fishers, veterinary officers, schools, municipalities, government agencies and local communities to create awareness and encourage a change in perception and practice.

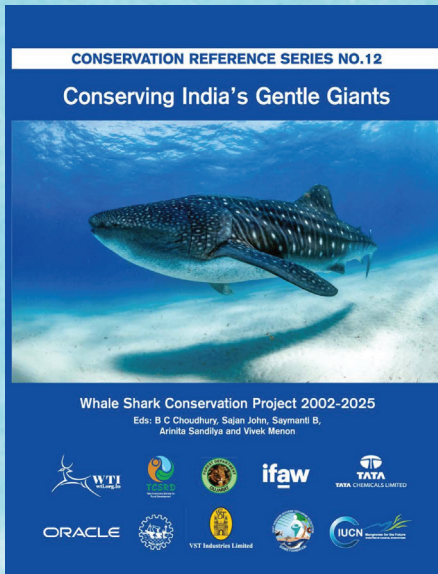
At the heart of this journey, however, are the people who have acted when it mattered.

This dossier is a small tribute to those real changemakers—the fishers who chose to cut their nets, bear the loss, face the risks and give a whale shark a second chance.

These are the stories of the people who made conservation work.

These are the heroes of the Kerala whale shark story.





Scan the QR code



Conserving India's Gentle Giants

This report highlights the plight and protection of the whale shark, the world's largest fish. Once heavily hunted along India's Gujarat coast, these gentle giants gained legal protection in 2001 under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972.

Spearheaded by the Wildlife Trust of India, the Whale Shark Conservation Project initiated a groundbreaking public-private effort to transform local fishers from hunters into protectors—resulting in the voluntary release of over 1,000 whale sharks. A detailed coastal survey conducted across nine states identified five new aggregation

zones and provided vital insights into whale shark ecology, threats, and community awareness. Today, new conservation efforts across Gujarat, Kerala and Lakshadweep are helping secure a hopeful future for this iconic species along India's coastline.



Whale Shark Rescuers



Art © Sayanti Basak



ABDUL SALAM

Date of rescue: 14/10/2018

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Ring Net

Size of whale shark: 14 ft

Place of rescue: Thannur

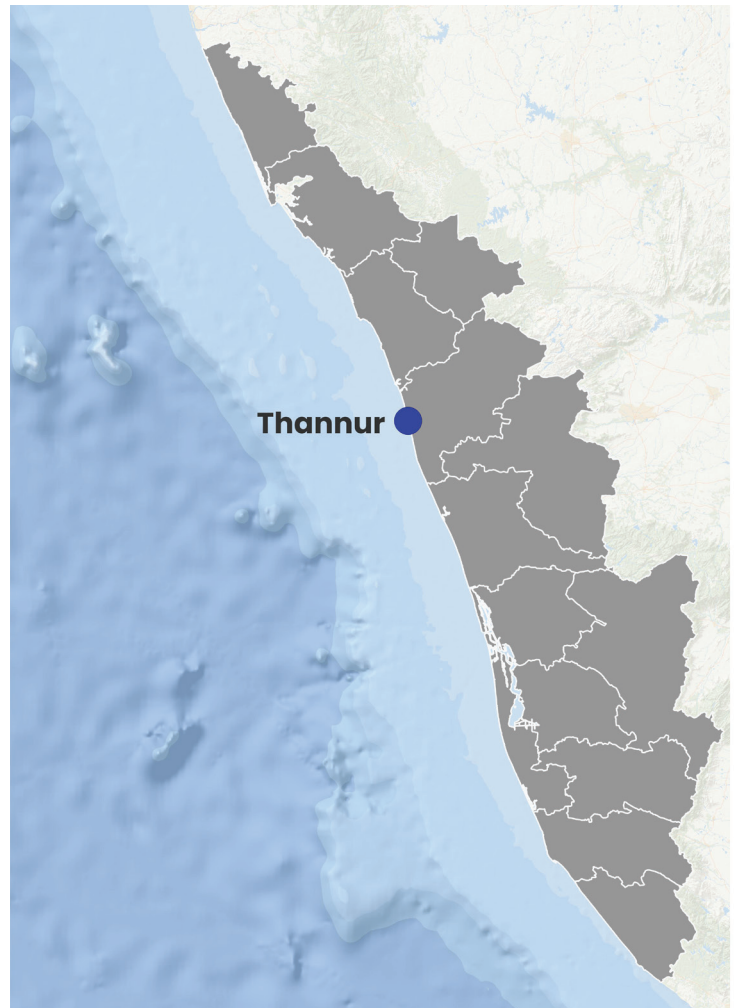
District: Malappuram

It was a regular fishing day, and we went to sea with two teams, one in a small boat and the other in a big boat. After casting the nets, we noticed that the ring net was not rising properly while hauling. On checking, we realised that a whale shark was entangled in the net. This was the first time we had ever seen one.

Knowing that this is a protected species, we carefully carried out a rescue operation that took around two hours and successfully released the whale shark back into the sea. Later, we realised that this was the first rescue and release of a whale shark in Kerala, and we are proud to have been part of this effort.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





I was involved in a whale shark rescue operation along the Kozhikode coast where it was accidentally entangled in a fishing net during routine fishing activity. On noticing the entanglement, the fishing crew immediately stopped all operations and decided to release the animal safely back into the sea.

The rescue required careful coordination and physical effort, as freeing such a large marine animal involved cutting the fishing net and working under challenging conditions. Despite the risk and economic loss involved, the crew remained committed to ensuring the safety of the whale shark. With collective effort, it was successfully released.

BABU M

Date of rescue: 25/01/2020

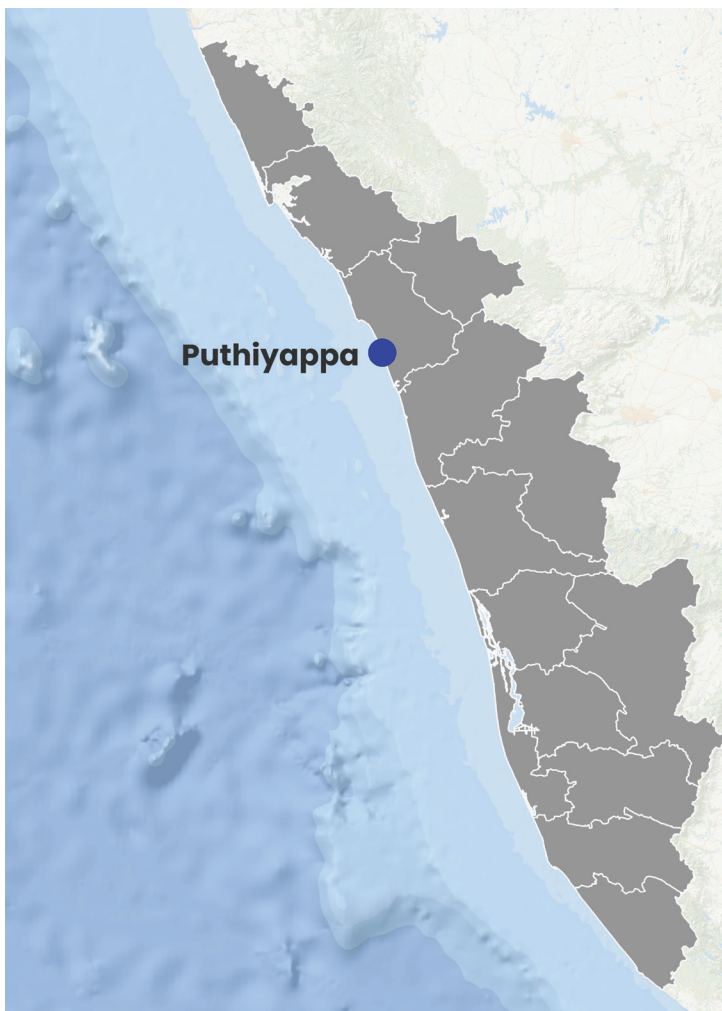
Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Trawler net

Size of whale shark: 12 ft

Place of rescue: Puthiyappa

District: Kozhikode



Map showing the landing centre and harbours (Thanur, Puthiyappa and Kannur) wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



LATE JOHN MARTIN

Date of rescue: 21/12/2025

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 15 ft

Place of rescue: Shankumugham

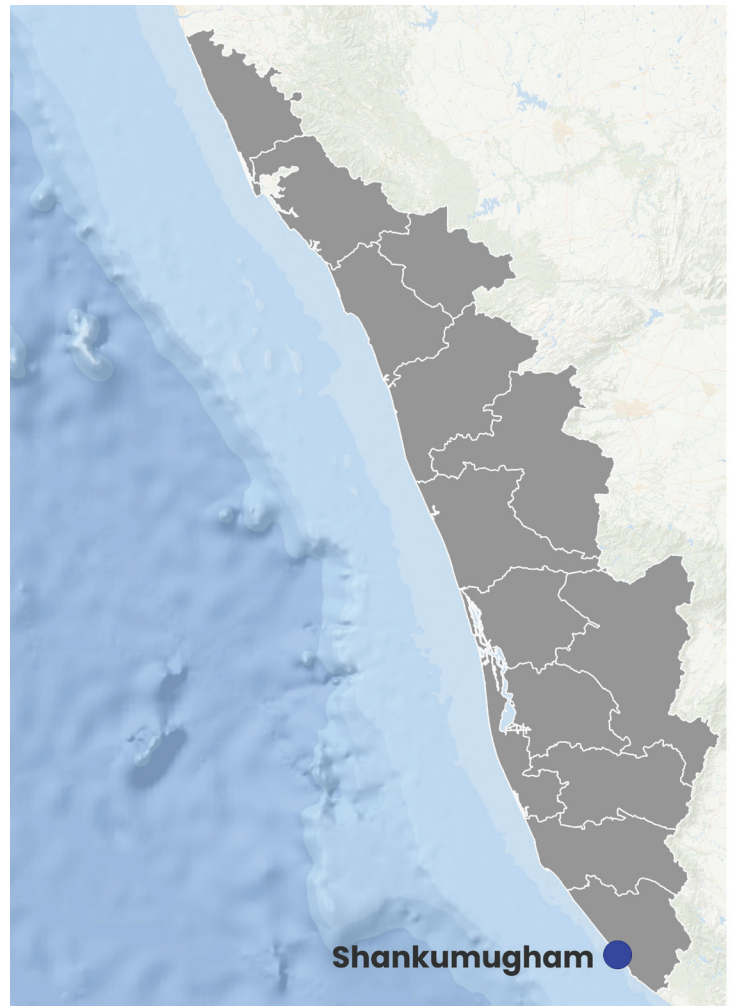
District: Thiruvananthapuram

I have been fishing along the shores of Shanghumugham Beach, Thiruvananthapuram, for more than twenty years. One early morning, what began as a routine fishing operation quickly turned into an unforgettable experience. While hauling in the shore seine net, I felt an unusual weight and as the net surfaced, I saw a massive whale shark entangled in it. The sight left all of us silent for a moment this gentle giant, protected and endangered, was struggling helplessly in our net.

Without hesitation, we stopped all fishing activities and decided to release the animal, even though it meant damaging an expensive net and facing financial loss. Working together under difficult conditions, we carefully cut the net piece by piece to avoid injuring the whale shark. After sustained effort, the animal was freed and slowly guided back into the sea. Watching it regain strength and swim away was a powerful moment of relief and pride.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





MOHAMMAD MAHEEN

Date of rescue: 02/04/2021

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

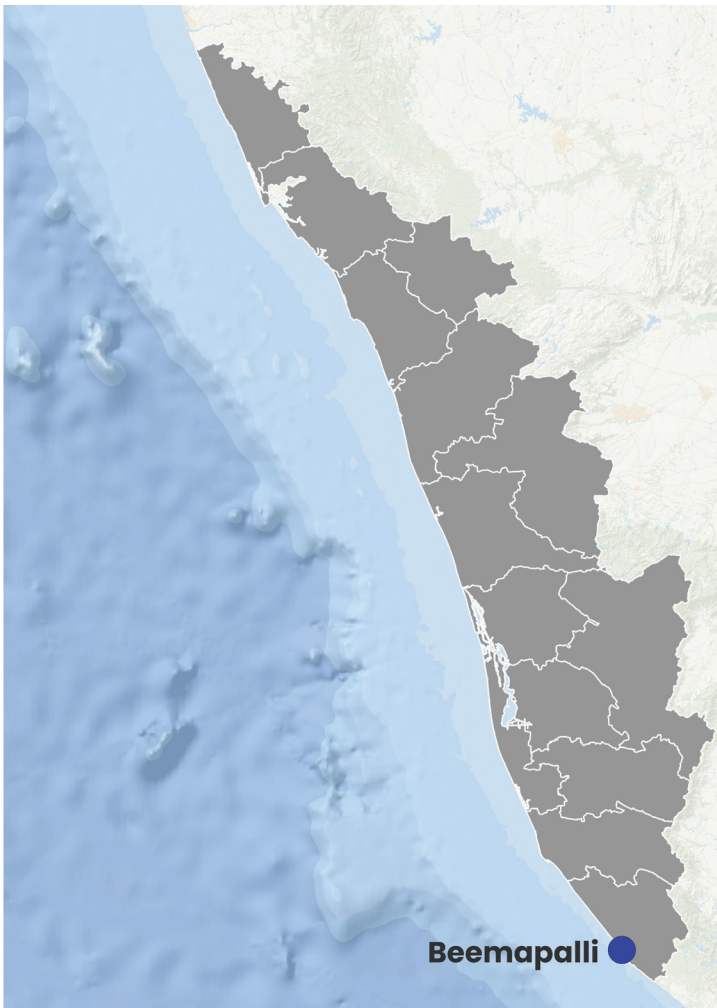
Size of whale shark: 10 ft

Place of rescue: Beemapalli

District: Thiruvananthapuram

One morning, while I was fishing along with my crew using my shore seine net, a whale shark became entangled during the operation. Concerned for its well-being we decided to jump into action to free the distressed animal. During the initial attempts to control the net, three fishermen were injured, highlighting the risk involved in such rescue operations. My first priority was to ensure the safety of my crew while preventing further harm to the animal.

I coordinated the rescue on site, assigned roles, and guided the crew through safe procedures while actively participating in the operation which lasted for more than three hours. Working carefully, we gradually freed the whale shark and guided it back into deeper waters.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



BRUNO GOMEZ

Date of rescue: 23/02/2022

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 10 ft

Place of rescue: Kochuvelli

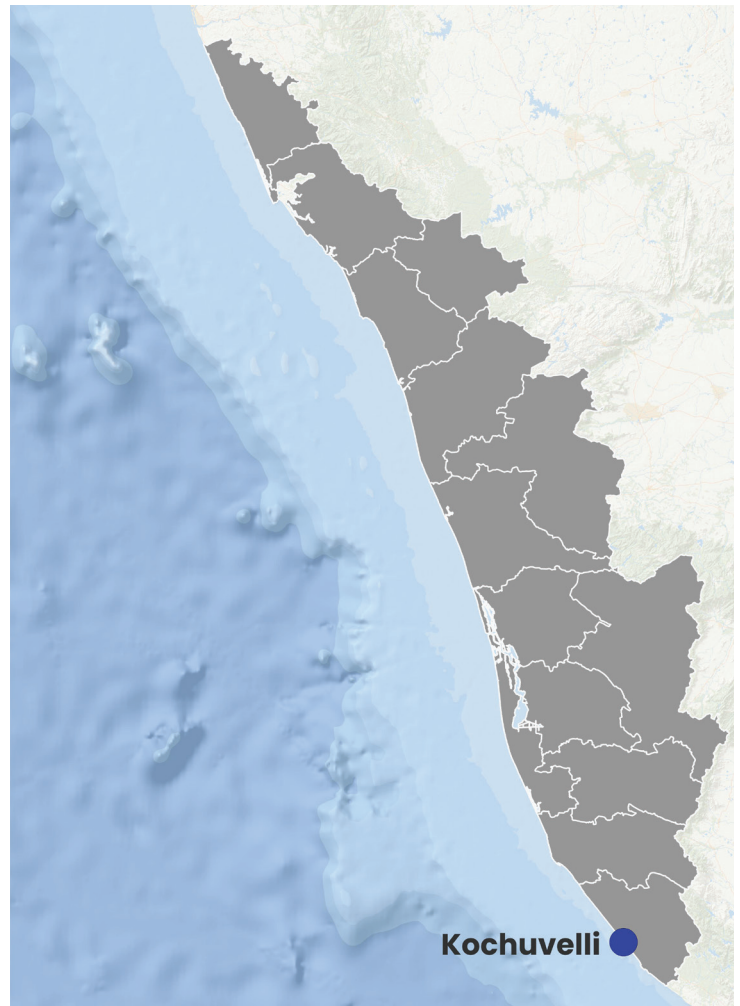
District: Thiruvananthapuram

As a shore seine owner, participating in a whale shark rescue was a challenging yet meaningful experience. When the whale shark became entangled in our net, I immediately instructed my team to stop hauling. Thirty workers were mobilized to manage the situation safely and patiently. The rescue operation lasted for nearly two hours, requiring coordinated effort and constant monitoring to prevent stress or injury to the animal.

We carefully cut the net and guided the whale shark toward deeper water. Once it was freed and swam away, everyone felt relieved and proud. This incident strengthened my understanding of marine conservation and showed how fishermen can play an important role in protecting endangered species while continuing their livelihood responsibly.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





JOSE R

Date of rescue: 15/12/2022

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

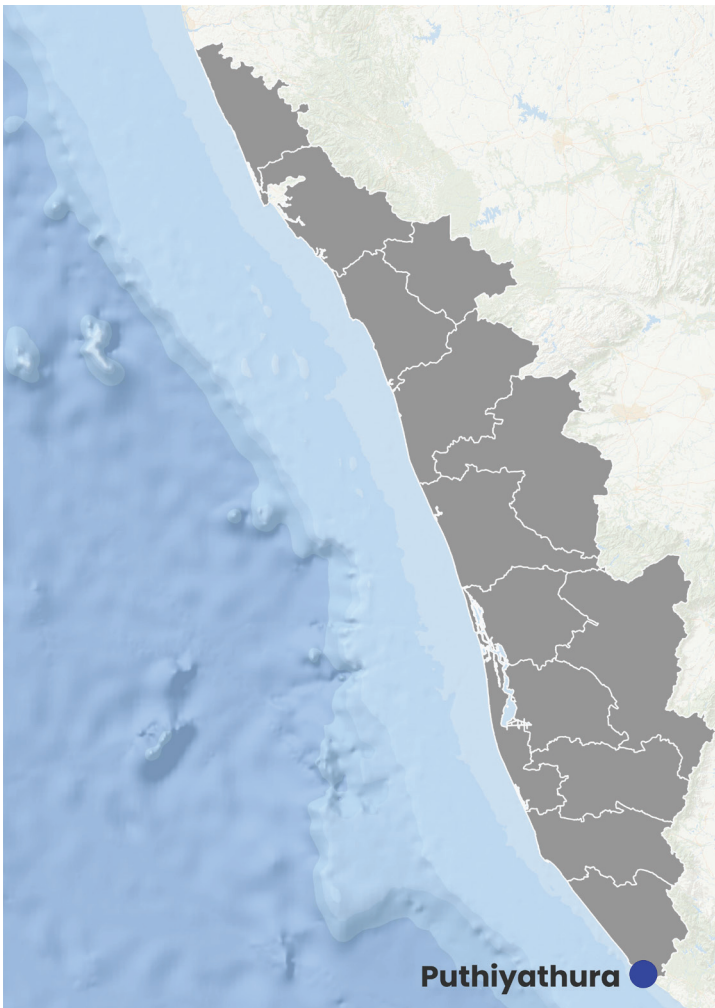
Size of whale shark: 25 ft

Place of rescue: Puthiyathura

District: Thiruvananthapuram

As a fisherman, I once participated in a challenging whale shark rescue. Early one morning, my shore seiner net caught a whale shark. Realising the danger, I immediately halted all operations.

The rescue process stretched over nearly three hours. We patiently waited for the water to calm before carefully loosening the net, section by section. Effective communication among my team was essential and everyone remained focussed and patient. We ensured the whale shark could breathe freely and move its body without injury. Finally, when it swam away safely, the sense of achievement was immense.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



NIXON S

Date of rescue: 21/12/2022

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 28 ft

Place of rescue: Poonthura

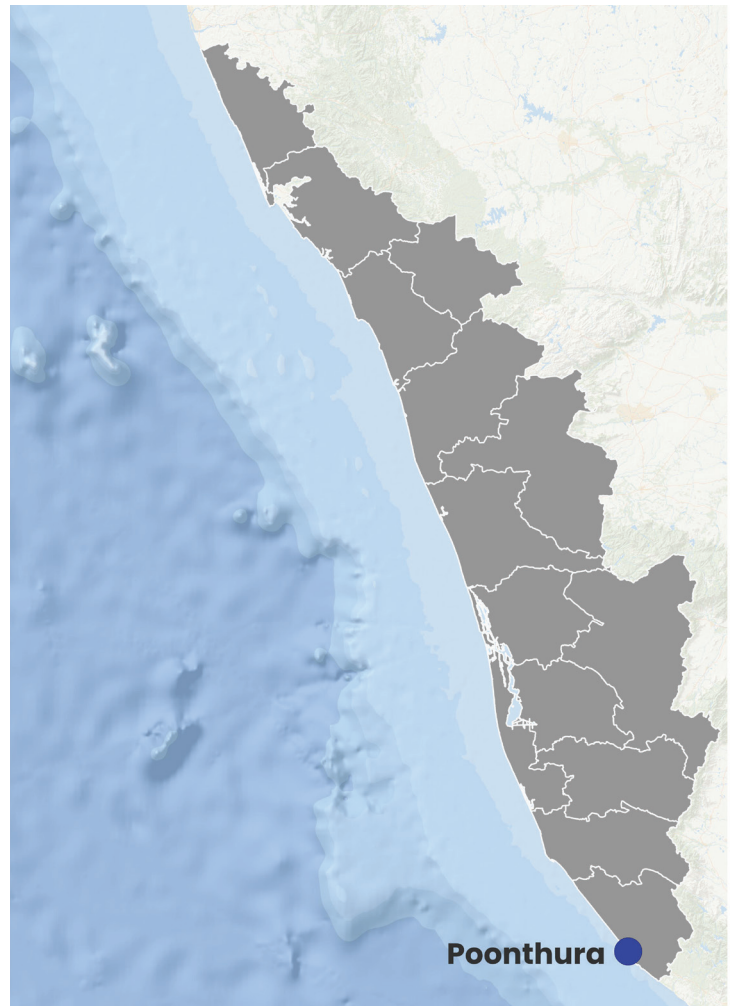
District: Thiruvananthapuram

The whale shark rescue I experienced remains one of the most important moments of my life at sea. During a routine shore seine operation, we noticed a whale shark accidentally entangled in our net. The rescue operation took about four hours, requiring patience, and coordination

Throughout the process, we avoided sudden movements and slowly opened the net to release the whale shark. This experience taught me that fishermen have a strong responsibility to protect endangered species while continuing our traditional fishing practices in a sustainable manner.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





ASHARAF ALI

Date of rescue: 23/01/2023,
19/03/2024, 06/04/2024, 03/10/2024
& 17/12/2024

Number of rescue: 05

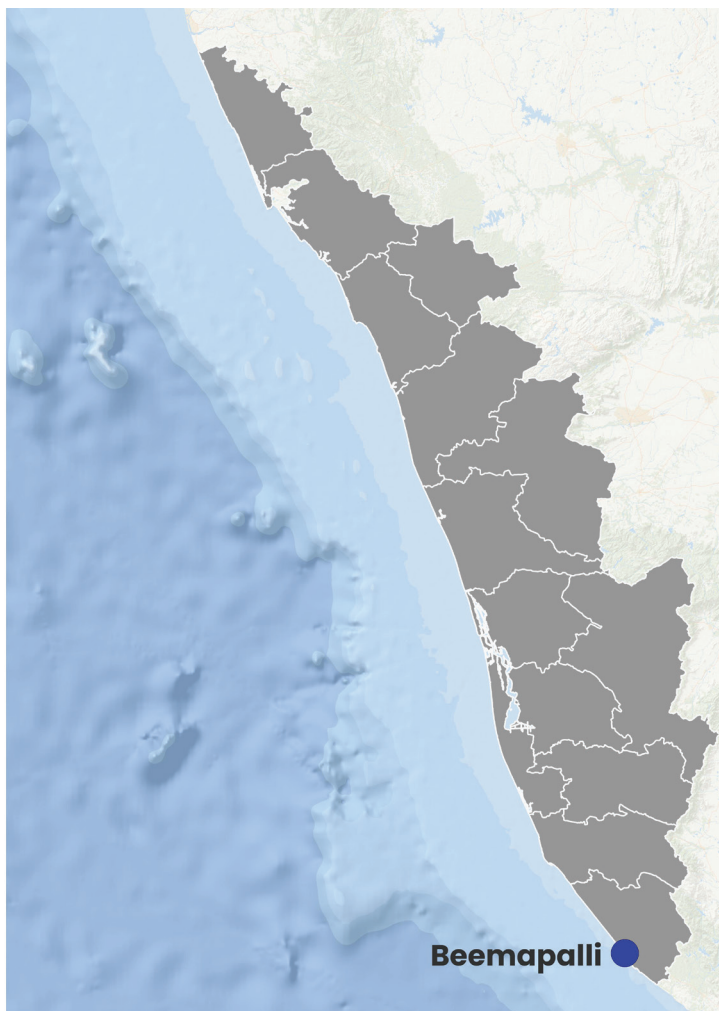
Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 25 ft, 35 ft, 9 ft,
24ft & 9ft

Place of rescue: Beemapalli
District: Thiruvananthapuram

As a fisherman with over 20 years of experience, I've had many adventures and visited various places for fishing. However, rescuing a whale shark remains one of the most unforgettable experiences of my career.

Trained by WTI to handle such situations, I have successfully coordinated five whale shark rescues. This training has also enabled me to guide my crew in carefully releasing whale sharks entangled in fishing nets, ensuring minimal stress to the animal.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



PAULOSE BERNALD

Date of rescue: 08/02/2023

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 20 ft

Place of rescue: Shankumugham

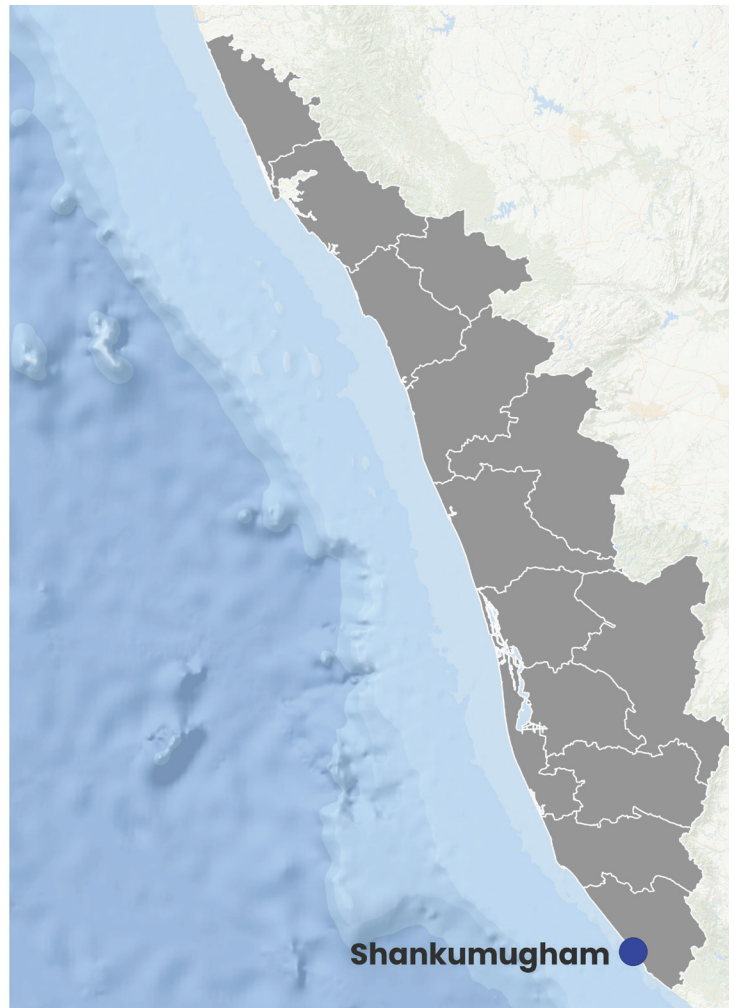
District: Thiruvananthapuram

With a background rooted in fishing, I have been engaged in this activity since my childhood. Over the years, I have acquired expertise in various fishing methods, including boat fishing and shore seine fishing. However, due to an injury sustained during fishing activities five years ago, I was unable to return to deep-water fishing. As a result, I began focusing mainly on shore seine operations.

On the day the whale shark became entangled, we were already informed of the situation, as similar incidents had occurred in the nets of nearby fishermen. Anticipating such a possibility, my team and I remained vigilant and prepared. When the whale shark became entangled, we responded swiftly and calmly, adhering to safe handling practices. Thanks to our awareness and preparedness, we were able to release the whale shark back into the sea promptly, without causing any harm.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





District: Thiruvananthapuram

Fishing is more than just a tradition for me; it is my passion. I embarked on my fishing journey at a young age, learning the skills and values of the profession alongside my father. I am a fisherman who specialises in shore seine fishing, operating three shore seine nets strategically placed in various locations based on fish availability.

During what initially seemed like a typical day of fishing, a whale shark became entangled in one of our nets. Some of my fellow fishermen were apprehensive, as it was their first encounter with such a large animal. Fortunately, Ajith from WTI arrived and guided us, facilitating a swift and safe release of the whale shark. Subsequently, the WTI team provided us with training on handling accidental whale shark entanglements. Armed with this knowledge, we successfully rescued three whale sharks in a single incident, followed by another rescue of three more, bringing our total to seven whale shark rescues.

SHAHUL HAMEED

Date of rescue:

26/03/2023(1),19/03/2024(3)
15/12/2024(1),3/03/2025(1)
&1/05/2025(1)

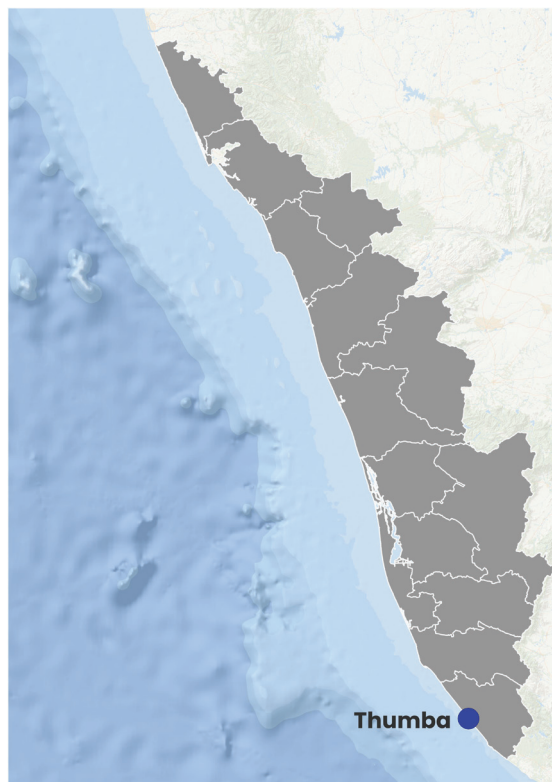
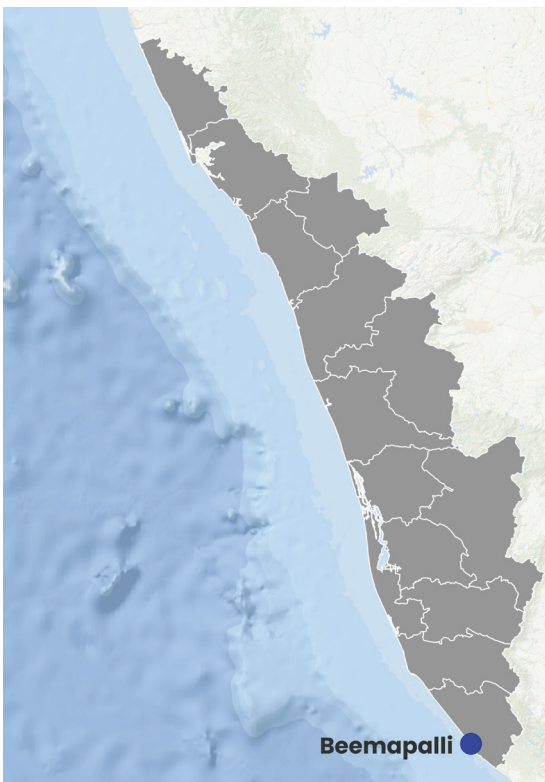
Number of rescue: 07

Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 24ft, 14ft, 24ft,
24ft, 14ft, 10ft, & 06ft

Place of rescue: Beemapalli (4) &
Tumba(3)

Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





SHIHABUDHEEN

Date of rescue: 24/11/2023

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 23 ft

Place of rescue: Beemapalli

District: Thiruvananthapuram

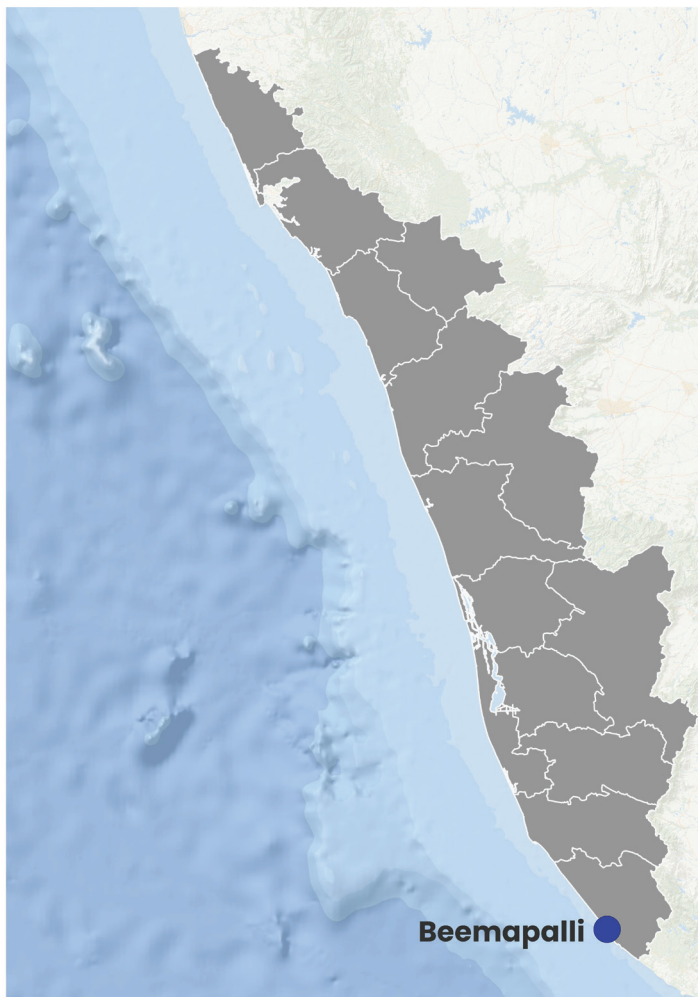
Having a background in fishing, I only began fishing in my late fifties, as I had spent a considerable amount of time working in Qatar. Upon returning from abroad, I acquired a shore seine net and commenced fishing with my team.

One day, we were informed that a whale shark had become entangled in a friend's net. He cautioned me to remain vigilant, as such incidents could occur at any time. I promptly communicated the situation to my fellow fishermen and advised them to stay alert.

As anticipated, an entanglement did occur. By acting swiftly and in coordination with the team, we successfully released the whale shark and guided it back to the sea within half an hour.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





SHINJU JOSE

Date of rescue: 4/12/2023 (1) & 1/3/2025(2)

Number of rescue: 03

Type of net: Shore seiner

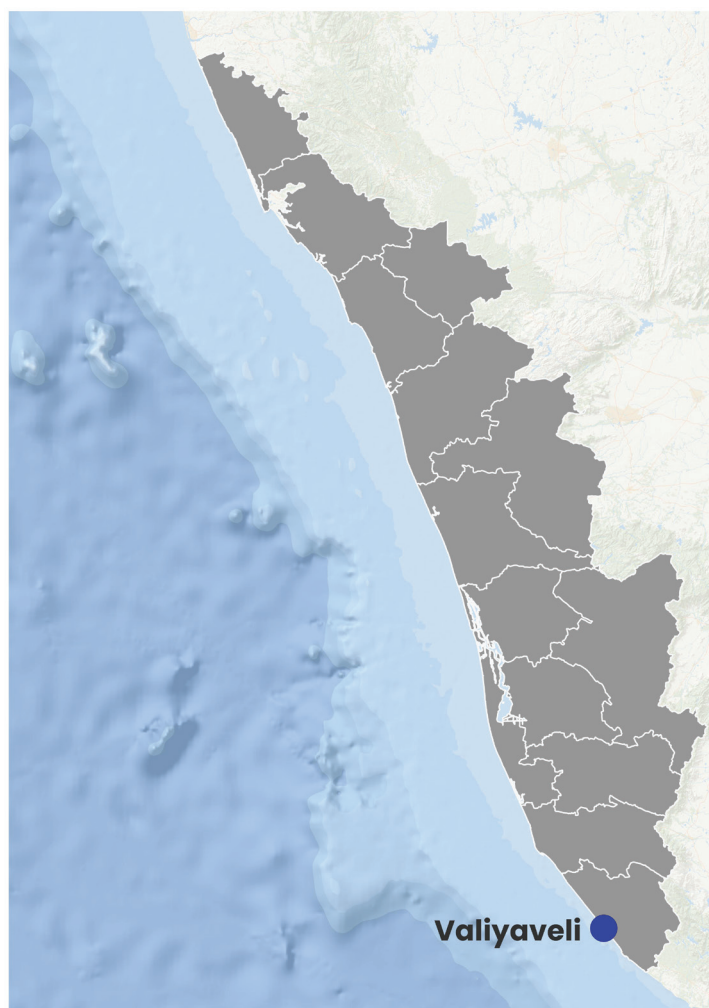
Size of whale shark: 10 ft, 10ft & 16ft

Place of rescue: Valiyaveli

District: Thiruvananthapuram

During my childhood, my father, a traditional fisherman, frequently shared stories about whale sharks and their behaviours. However, it wasn't until I embarked on my own fishing career that I had the opportunity to witness one first-hand. One day, while fishing with my team using a shore seine net, I encountered a whale shark entangled in the net for the first time. At first glance, it was enormous—unlike anything I had ever seen.

With care and coordination, we were able to rescue the whale shark and return it safely to the sea. It was a proud moment for me. The training and awareness provided by the WTI team helped me handle the situation effectively. Two years later, two more whale sharks were found entangled in our net, and we were able to release them safely in a short span of time.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



RAJU STEPHEN

Date of rescue: 28/12/2023

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 22 ft

Place of rescue: Pallithura

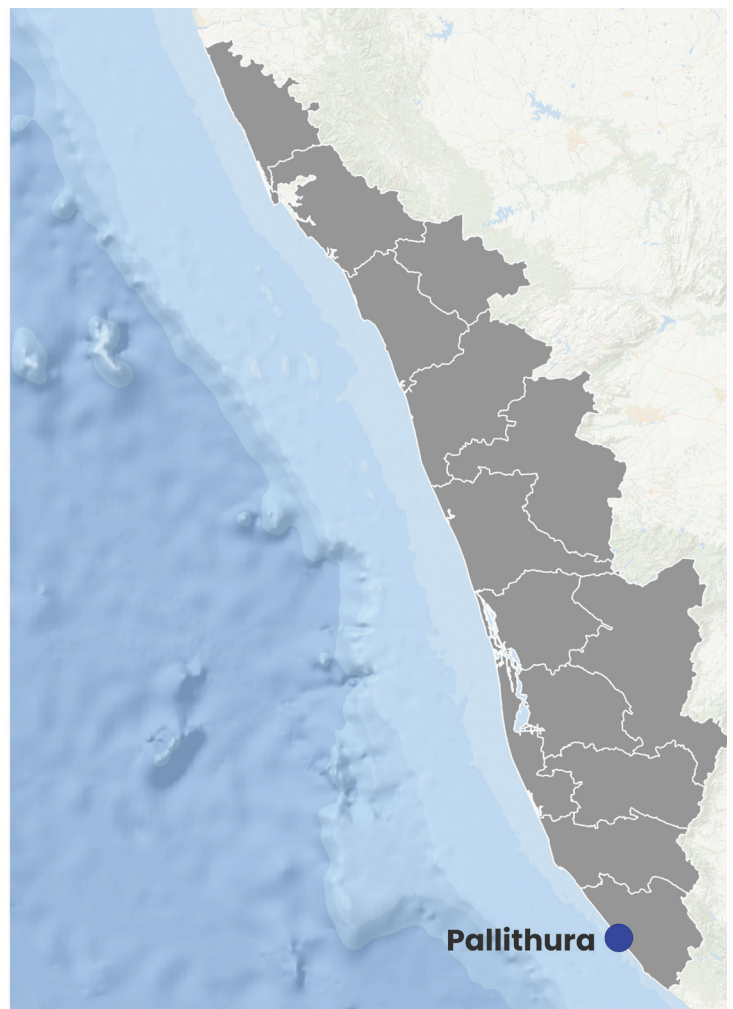
District: Thiruvananthapuram

When we fish using the shore seine nets it usually takes 3 hours to recover the net however on this particular day it took much longer. When the net finally reached the shore, we realised that a whale shark was accidentally entangled in it.

I immediately coordinated with my team and personally took the initiative to carefully cut the net before releasing the whale shark safely back into the sea.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





JBOY LOPEZ

Date of rescue: 12/01/2024

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

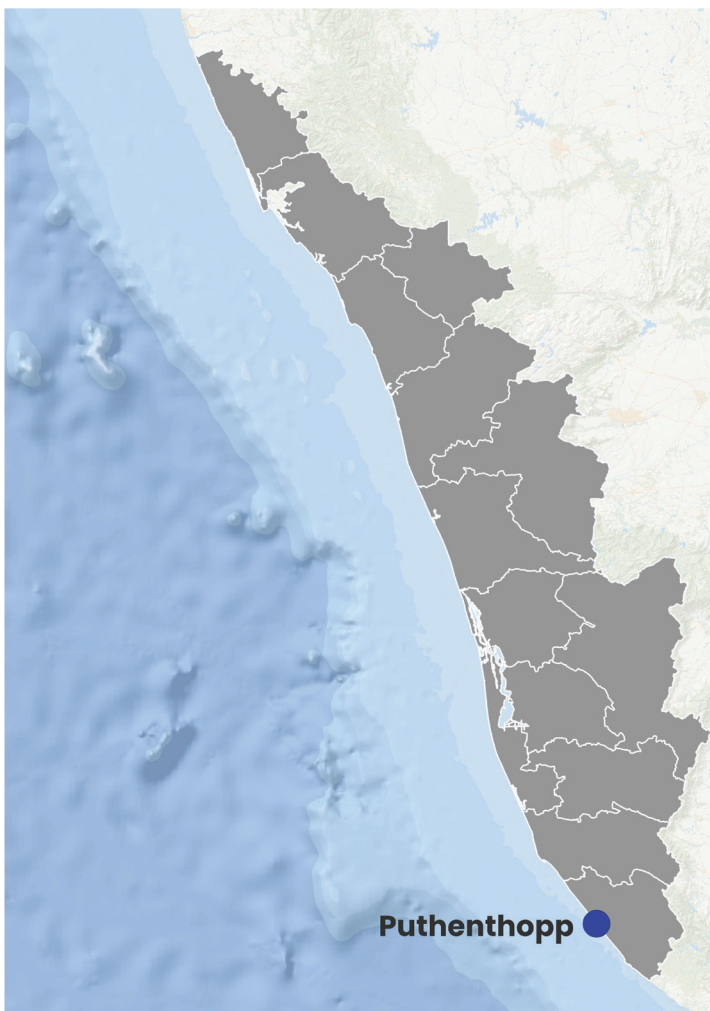
Size of whale shark: 18 ft

Place of rescue: Puthenthopp

District: Thiruvananthapuram

Fishing has been a longstanding tradition in our family, passed down through generations since the time of our great-grandparents. Beginning in November, the WTI team proactively informed us about the risk of accidental whale shark entanglements and provided training on the appropriate response measures.

As anticipated, one evening while using a shore seine net, an accidental entanglement did occur. Thanks to the training we received, our team responded calmly, adhering to established protocols and successfully releasing the whale shark back into the ocean.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



SIMON SAJU

Date of rescue: 13/01/2024

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 15 ft

Place of rescue: Pallithura

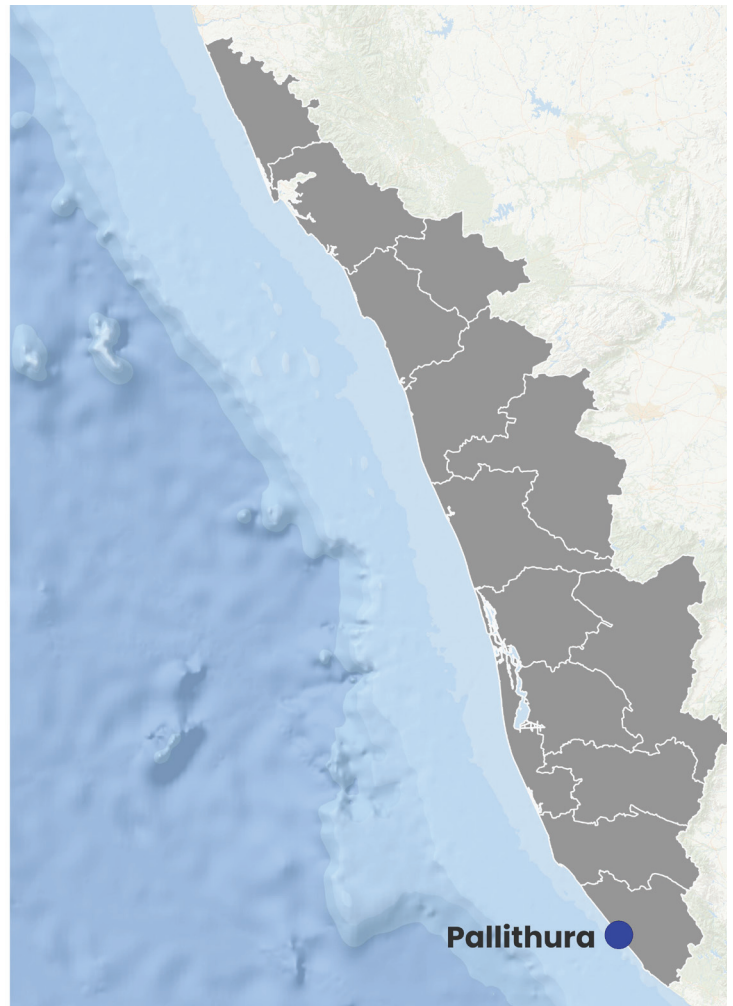
District: Thiruvananthapuram

The day prior to our own incident, a friend from Puthenthooop encountered a whale shark entanglement in his fishing net. In response, the shore seine fishing community convened a meeting during which the WTI team proactively briefed us on strategies for preventing and managing accidental entanglements.

Later that same day, a whale shark became entangled in my net. As our team was well prepared, we responded promptly and successfully released the whale shark back into the sea within a matter of a few minutes.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





District: Thiruvananthapuram

I began fishing alongside my father at the age of 12, and by 26, I had acquired two boats, both named Famitha. On one occasion, a routine fishing expedition took a dramatic turn when three whale sharks became entangled in our net simultaneously.

Their sheer size made the release extremely challenging. Several of my fellow fishermen entered the water to cut the net and one crew member was injured in the process. It took almost four hours to safely free the sharks. In a subsequent incident, thanks to increased awareness and training among the fishermen, we managed to release another whale shark back into the sea.

SAJEER FAZIL

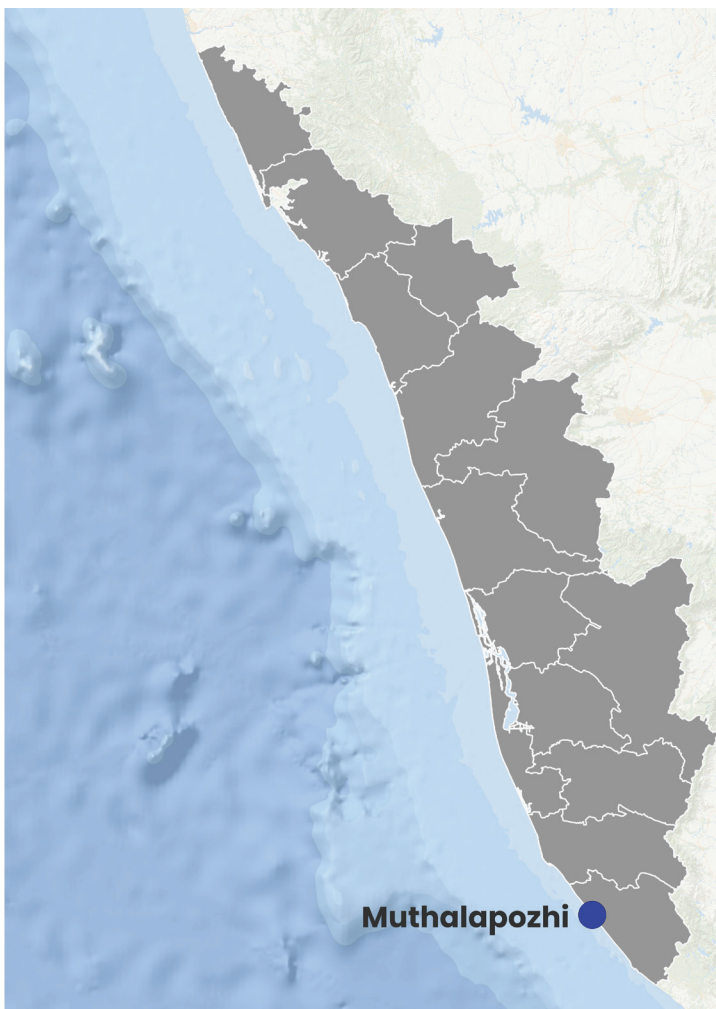
Date of rescue: 12/10/2023(3) & 4/12/2024(1)

Number of rescue: 04

Type of net: Ring net

Size of whale shark: 24 ft, 16 ft, 14 ft & 16 ft

Place of rescue: Muthalapozhi



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



This incident took place during an unexpected tidal shift, when the current intensified beyond our anticipation. As we retrieved the shore seine net, we noticed an unusual resistance. Upon closer inspection, we discovered a whale shark entangled along the net's outer edge. I directed the team to gradually loosen the net and refrain from any abrupt movements. By coordinating our efforts with the tide, we successfully released the animal without causing further harm.

SIBIL M

Date of rescue: 23/03/2024

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

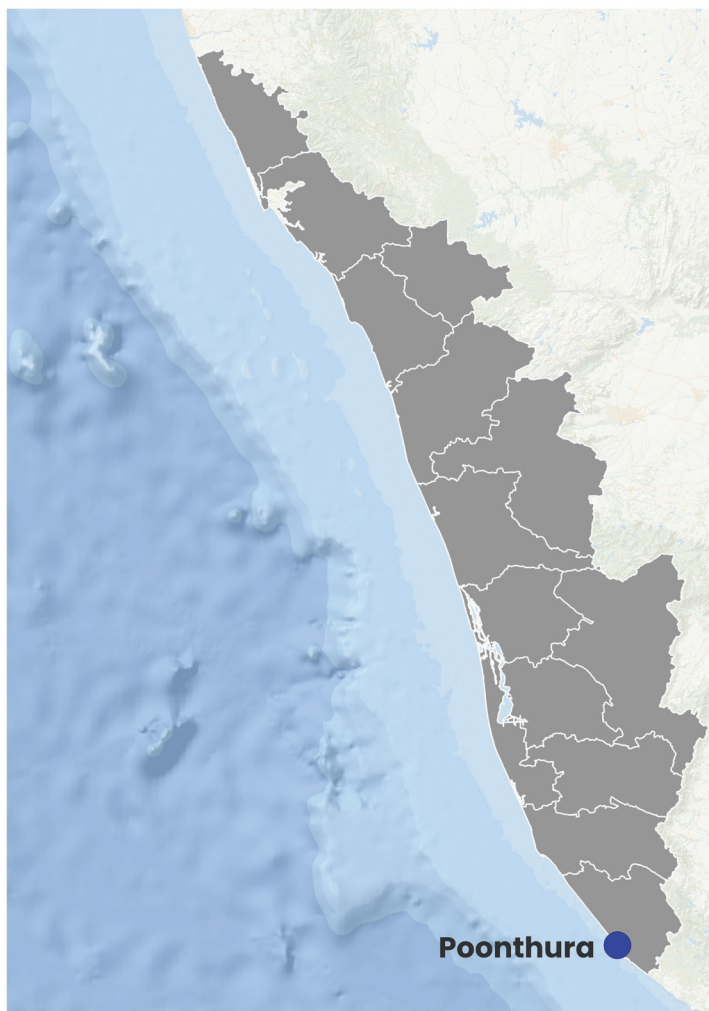
Size of whale shark: 26 ft

Place of rescue: Poonthura

District: Thiruvananthapuram



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





JIBIN B

Date of rescue: 9/11/2024

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Purse seiner

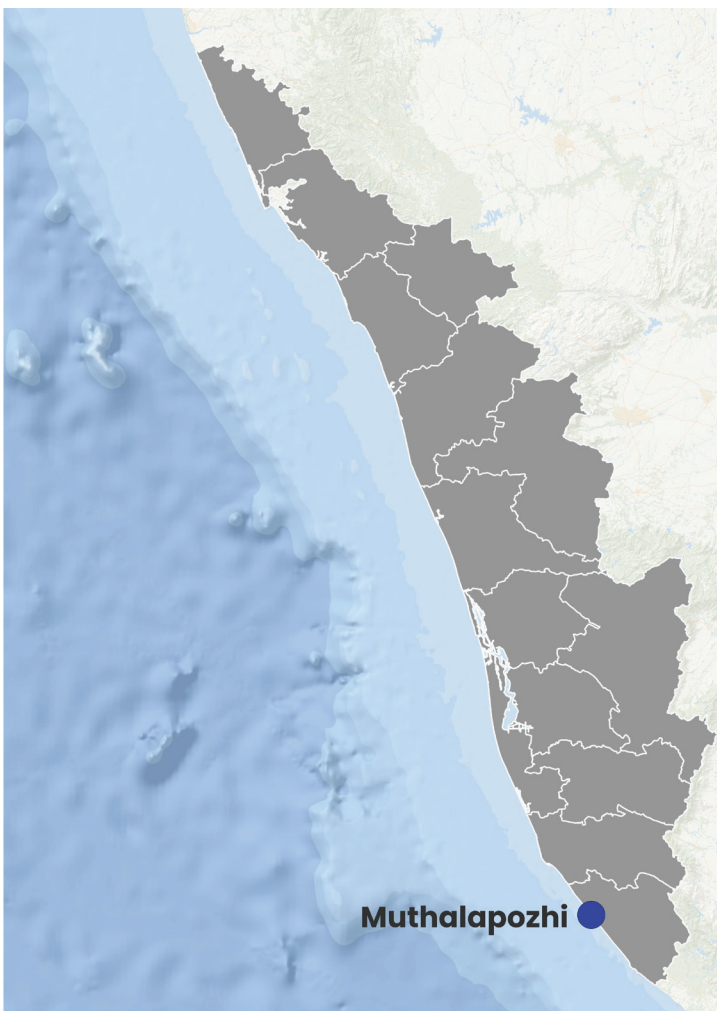
Size of whale shark: 16 ft

Place of rescue: Muthalapozhi

District: Thiruvananthapuram

During this incident, several of the young fishermen joined the crew for the first time. When a whale shark became entangled in the net, it was clear that many of them felt anxious and uncertain.

I took the opportunity to explain the situation and demonstrate the proper technique for cutting the net without causing harm to the animal. This rescue not only ensured the whale shark's safety but also served as a valuable hands-on lesson for the younger fishermen, enhancing their awareness and confidence for future incidents.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



During this operation, multiple gill seine teams were fishing nearby. When a whale shark became accidentally entangled in our net, I immediately requested assistance from the neighboring teams. They responded without delay, helping to manage the net from different vantage points. This coordinated effort significantly reduced stress on the animal and allowed us to carry out the rescue smoothly, underscoring the importance of collaboration among fishing communities.

ANDREWS ANTONY

Date of rescue: 10/11/2024

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Gill net

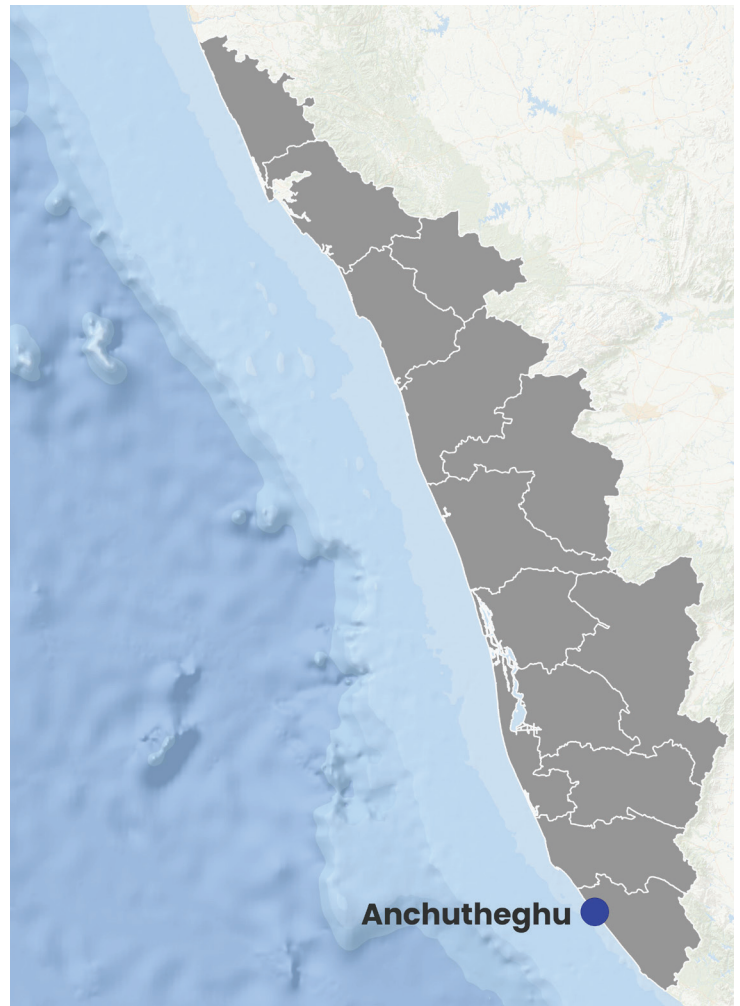
Size of whale shark: 09 ft

Place of rescue: Anchutheghu

District: Thiruvananthapuram



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





In this instance, we detected the entanglement early, before the whale shark began to struggle significantly. Responding promptly, I directed the crew to stop all hauling operations. By cutting only the essential sections of the net, we minimised stress on the whale shark and reduced damage to our fishing gear. The animal was released safely, clearly illustrating how early intervention can prevent greater losses.

BAIJU CV

Date of rescue: 29/11/2024

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Rind net

Size of whale shark: 16 ft

Place of rescue: Chettuva

District: Thrissur



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



DAVIDSON KARLOOSE

Date of rescue: 06/01/2025

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 14 ft

Place of rescue: Poonthura

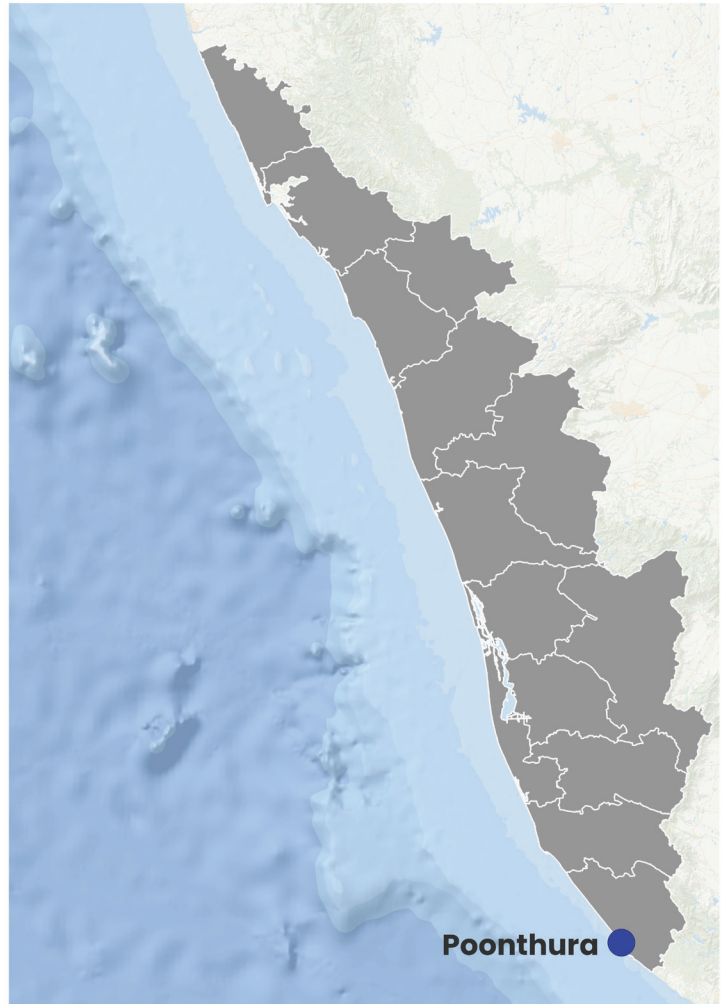
District: Thiruvananthapuram

On this day, the sea was turbulent, with strong waves and powerful currents. Despite the adverse weather, we observed unusual movement in the net as we hauled it in.

We quickly discovered that a whale shark had become entangled. I immediately halted the hauling process and coordinated with the crew to stabilize the net and minimize stress on the animal. Through teamwork and persistence, even under challenging conditions, we successfully freed the whale shark and ensured its safe return to the sea.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





During this incident, several young fishermen were part of the crew for the first time. When a whale shark became entangled, fear and confusion were visible among them. I took time to explain the situation and demonstrate the correct method of cutting the net without harming the animal. This rescue not only saved the whale shark but also became a practical learning experience for the younger fishermen, increasing awareness and confidence for future situations.

ANTONY SACHARIAS

Date of rescue: 14/1/2025

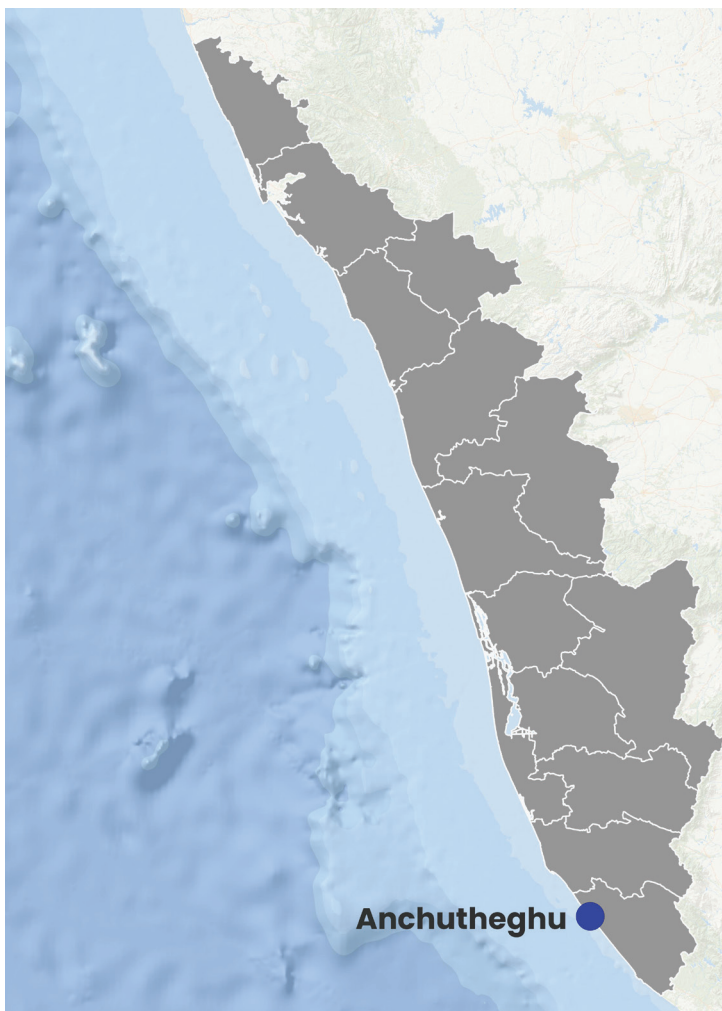
Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 10 ft

Place of rescue: Anchutheghu

District: Thiruvananthapuram



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



SEBASTIN ROSARIO

Date of rescue: 10/01/2025

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Ring net

Size of whale shark: 10 ft

Place of rescue: Azhikkal

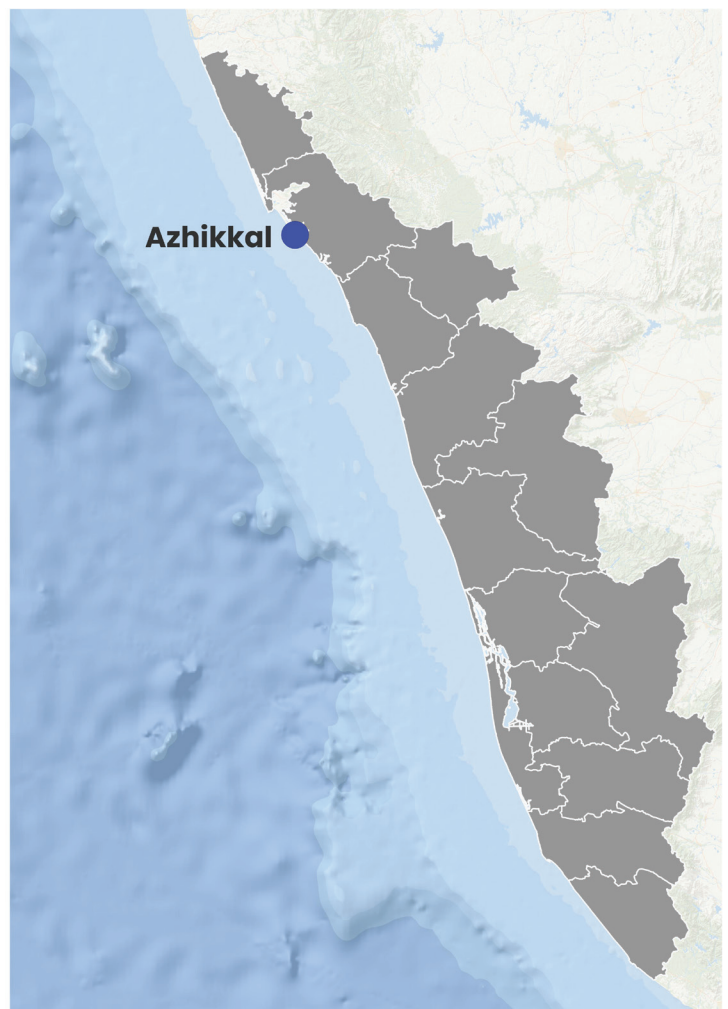
District: Kannur

On this day, the sea was turbulent, with strong waves and powerful currents. Despite the adverse weather, we observed unusual movement in the net as we hauled it in.

We quickly discovered that a whale shark had become entangled. I immediately halted the hauling process and coordinated with the crew to stabilize the net and minimize stress on the animal. Through teamwork and persistence, even under challenging conditions, we successfully freed the whale shark and ensured its safe return to the sea.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





On this occasion, the net remained in the water longer than usual because of weather-related delays. As we began hauling it in, we noticed an unusual heaviness. Upon inspection, we discovered a whale shark entangled in the net, yet it remained relatively calm. We immediately ceased hauling and carefully cut the net around its head and fins. The whale shark was released smoothly and swam away without any apparent injuries.

VINCENT BABU

Date of rescue: 03/03/2025

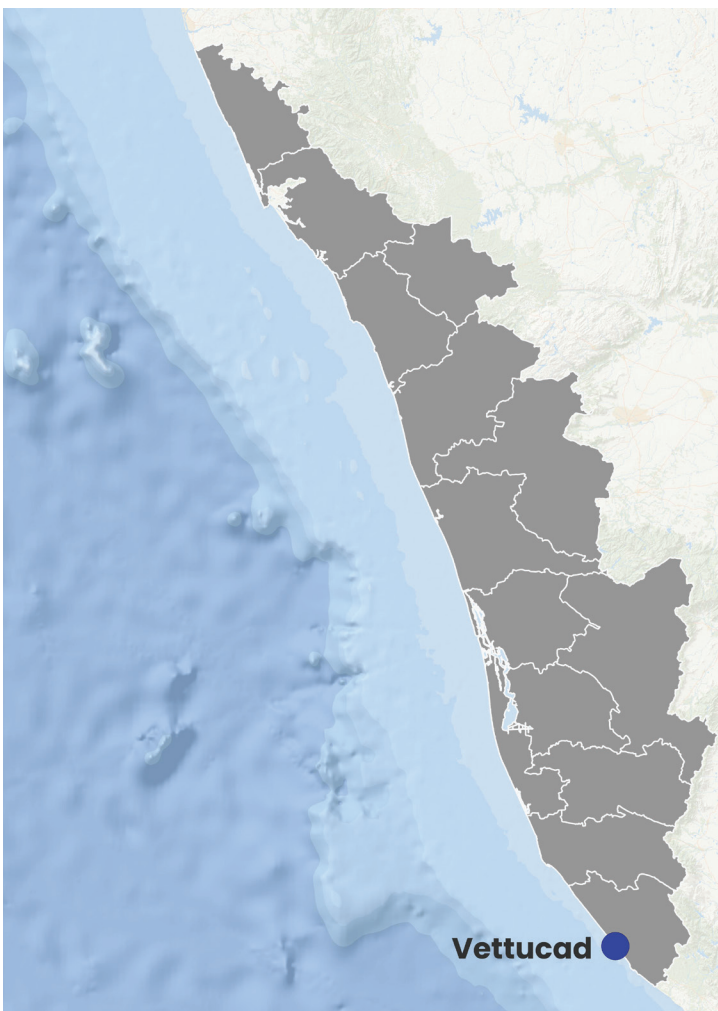
Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 14 ft

Place of rescue: Vettucaud

District: Thiruvananthapuram



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



During this operation, the initial sign of trouble was communicated through hand signals from experienced fishermen in the water. Their timely alert enabled us to detect the entanglement at an early stage. Following their guidance, I repositioned the crew and regulated the hauling speed. This quiet, coordinated effort minimized stress on the whale shark and allowed for a smooth and efficient release.

BAIJU ALPHONSE

Date of rescue: 04/03/2025

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

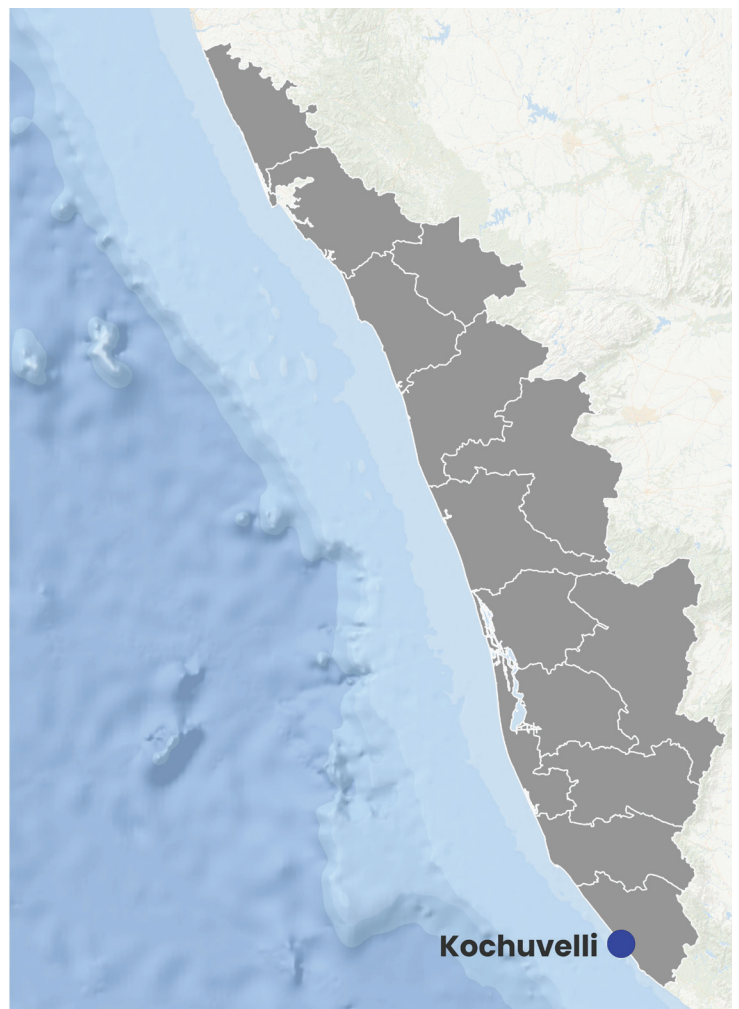
Size of whale shark: 16 ft

Place of rescue: Kochuvelli

District: Thiruvananthapuram



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





PETER SUNIL

Date of rescue: 05/03/2025(2) & 07/03/2025(1)

Number of rescue: 03

Type of net: Shore seiner

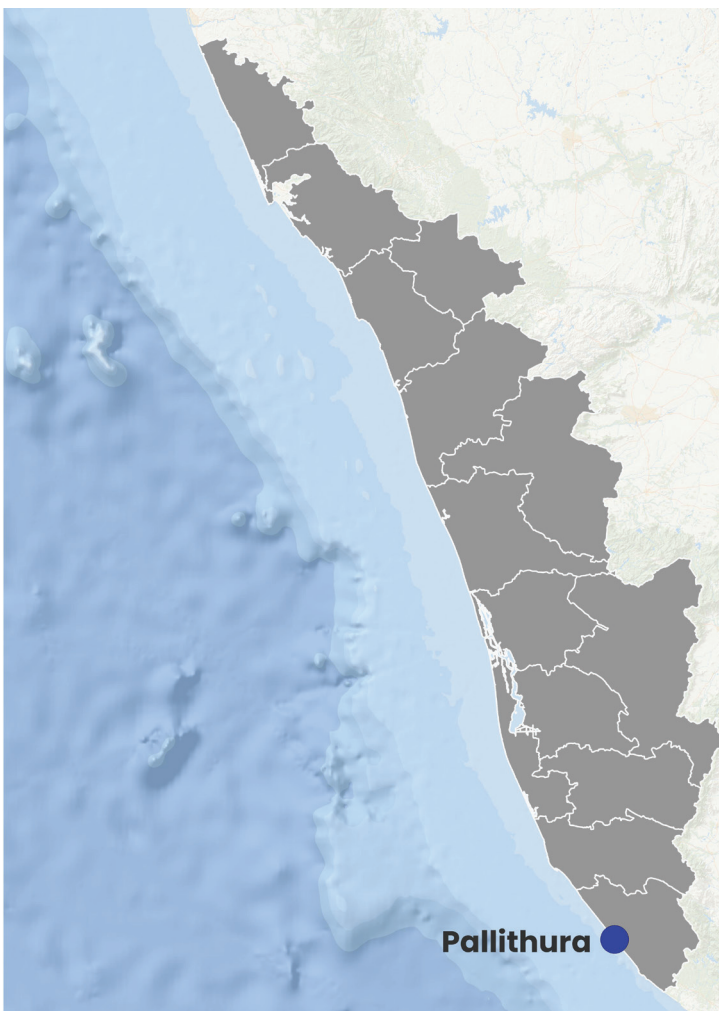
Size of whale shark: 14 ft, 14 ft & 09 ft

Place of rescue: Pallithura

District: Thiruvananthapuram

This was one of the most challenging and stressful days I have ever experienced. At the start of our fishing operation, two whale sharks became accidentally entangled in our net. Through considerable effort, we managed to release both animals back into the sea. However, one whale shark returned and became stranded once again, further complicating the situation. As the animal struggled, more fishermen joined the rescue, working together to guide it back to deeper water. The operation lasted nearly four hours and required coordination among several departments. Despite the immense pressure and difficulties, we ultimately succeeded in guiding the whale shark safely back to the sea.

Two days later, we faced another whale shark rescue. Drawing on the experience gained from the previous incident, we were better prepared and more organised. As a result, we successfully rescued and released it in a significantly shorter amount of time.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



This rescue occurred in the early hours of the day as we were hauling in the shore seine net. We noticed irregular movement and a sudden increase in the weight on the hauling line. Upon inspection, we found a whale shark entangled near the end of the net. I promptly directed the crew to cease pulling and ease the tension on the net. By carefully cutting the net in stages and guiding the whale shark toward deeper water, we safely released it back into the sea.

JOHNSON PAUL

Date of rescue: 06/03/2025

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

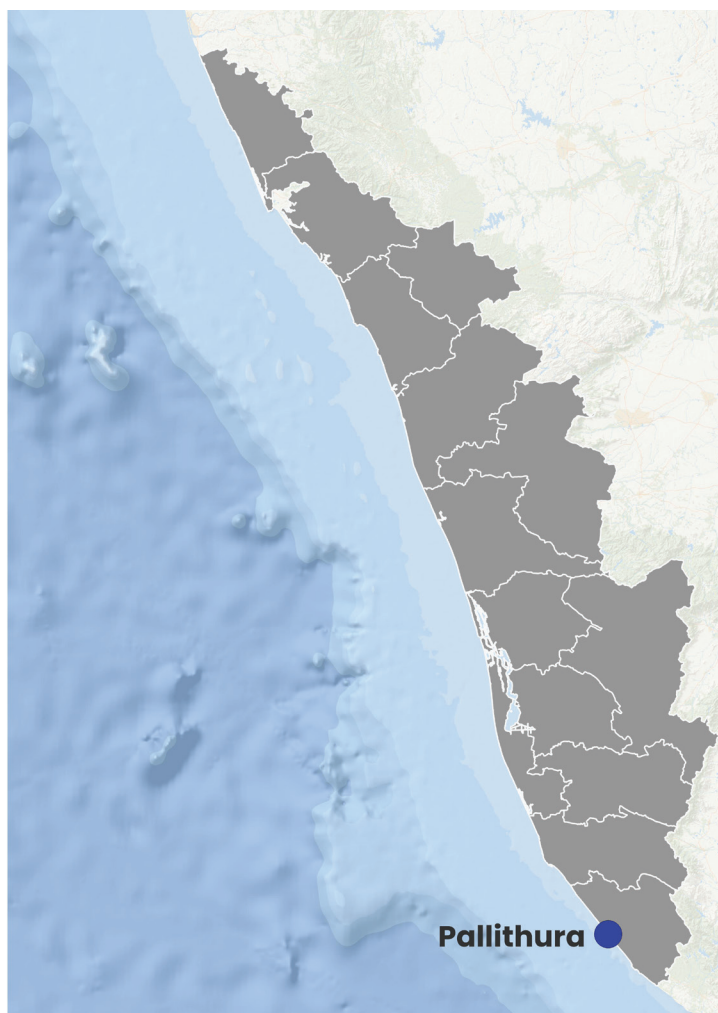
Size of whale shark: 16 ft

Place of rescue: Pallithura

District: Thiruvananthapuram



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted

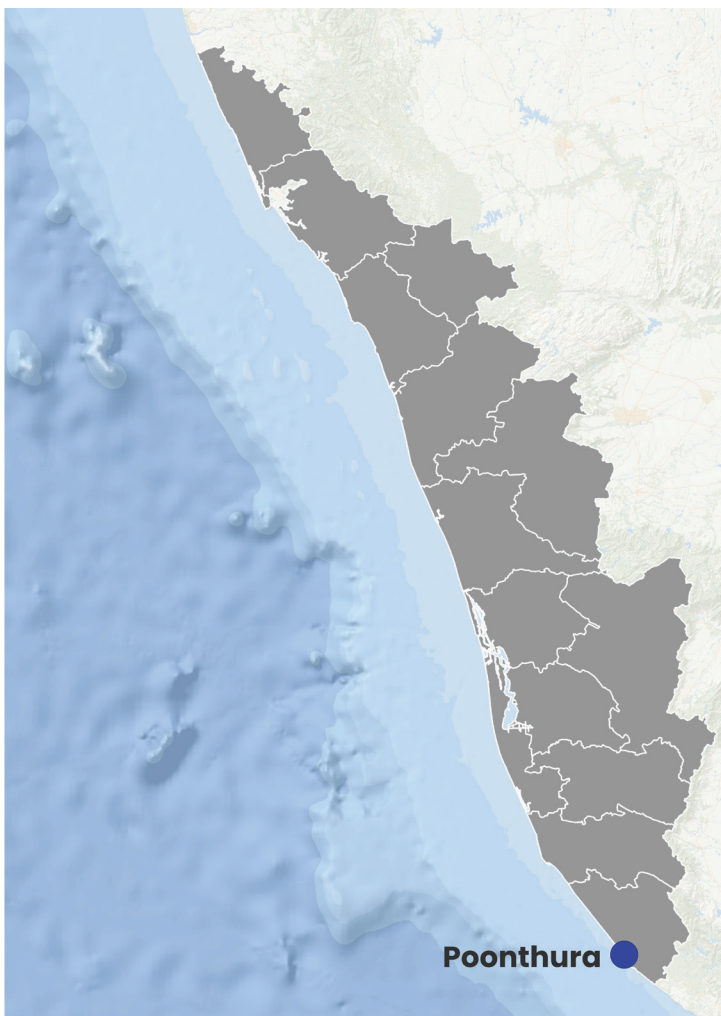




A whale shark became entangled near the center pocket of our shore seine net. The animal was highly stressed, moving powerfully, posing a risk to both the net and the fishermen. I assumed command and assigned specific roles to each team member some managed the net, others focused on cutting targeted sections, and a few oversaw safety. Through calm coordination and controlled effort, we successfully freed the whale shark and released it back into the sea, underscoring the value of teamwork and preparedness.

JELASTIN

Date of rescue: 08/03/2025
Number of rescue: 01
Type of net: Shore seiner
Size of whale shark: 14 ft
Place of rescue: Poonthura
District: Thiruvananthapuram



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



In this instance, the whale shark became entangled in a section of the net that was already weakened from prior use. Releasing the animal without causing additional damage proved challenging. I directed the team to make strategic cuts and temporarily reinforce the torn area. Once the whale shark was safely released, we conducted emergency repairs at sea, preventing further losses and safeguarding future operations.

CHILUVAYYAN

Date of rescue: 27/04/2025

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Ring net

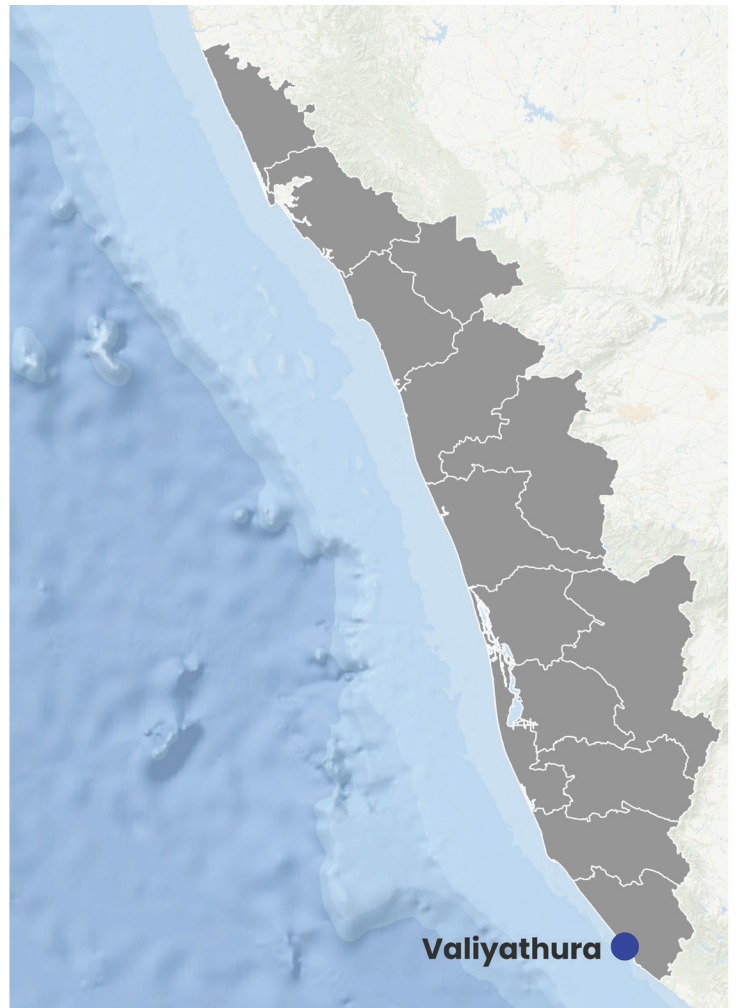
Size of whale shark: 08 ft

Place of rescue: Valiyathura

District: Thiruvananthapuram



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





This incident occurred during peak fishing season, when several nets were in operation at once. Amidst the busy activity, we noticed unusual tension in our net. Upon inspection, we discovered two whale sharks entangled. I immediately halted all nearby operations and coordinated with the crew to clear the net. Despite the time constraints and heavy workload, we successfully released the whale sharks and only resumed fishing after confirming their safe return to the sea.

LATE JESTIN

Date of rescue: 29/04/2025(2)

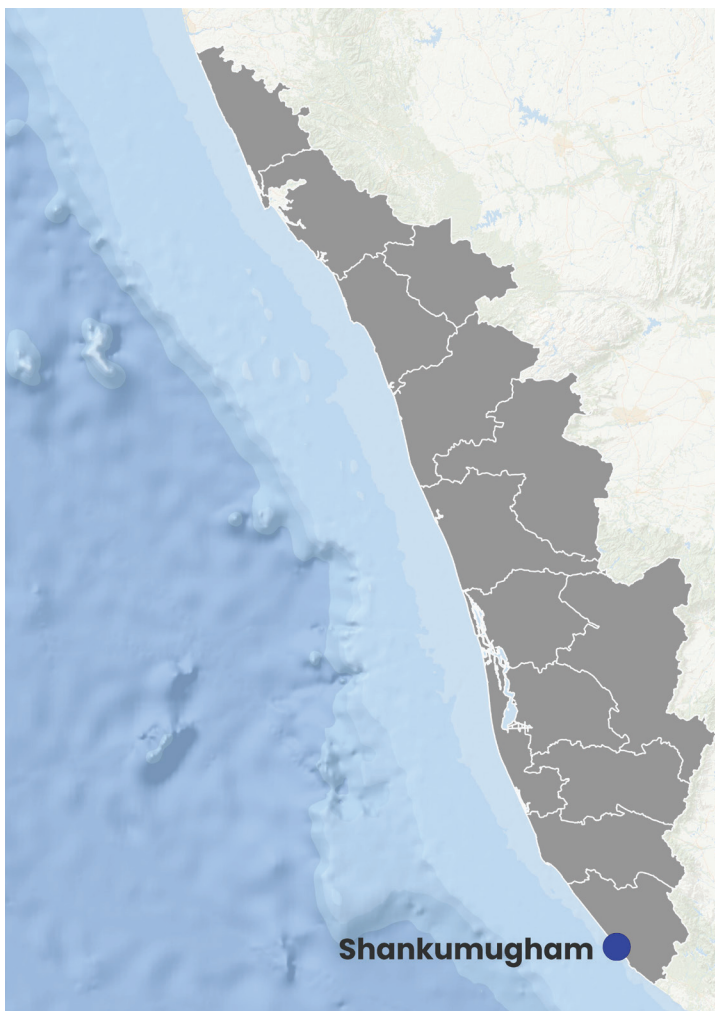
Number of rescue: 02

Type of net: Ring net

Size of whale shark: 12 ft & 16 ft

Place of rescue: Shankumugham

District: Thiruvananthapuram



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted



KUNJUMON JOY

Date of rescue: 16/04/2023

Number of rescue: 01

Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 15 ft

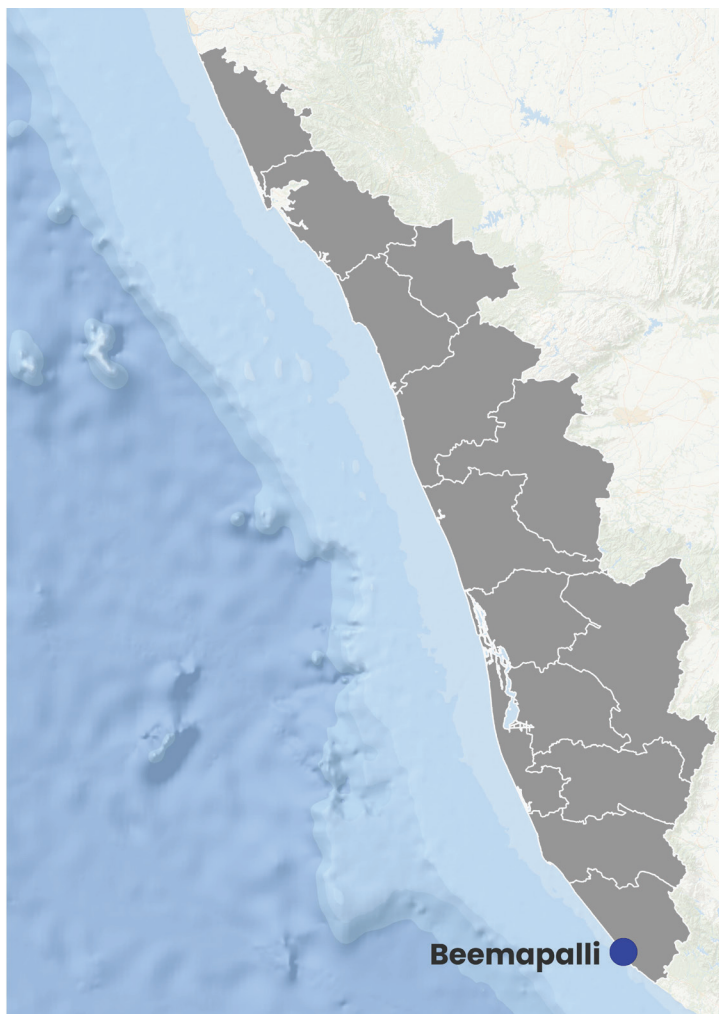
Place of rescue: Beemapalli

District: Thiruvananthapuram

Originating from the coastal fishing community of Beemapally, Mr. Kunjumon Joy devoted years to navigating the waters off the Thiruvananthapuram coast to sustain his livelihood. On April 16, 2023, while operating a traditional shore seiner, he and his team unexpectedly discovered a 15-foot-long whale shark entangled in their net. Recognising the significance of the animal, Mr. Joy and his team immediately halted operations and successfully untangled and released the whale shark. Although he has since relocated abroad to pursue new opportunities, his selfless actions and swift decision-making continue to serve as a celebrated example of community-driven conservation along the Kerala coast.



Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted





Having begun his career in Poonthura, Mr. Sabu Richard was a dedicated fisherman with extensive experience in ring net operations. On November 6, 2023, during a fishing expedition, a massive 20-foot-long whale shark became accidentally entangled in his net. Acting swiftly and with great care, Mr. Richard and his crew successfully freed the whale shark, allowing it to safely return to deeper waters. Though he has since relocated abroad and left his fishing career, his exemplary rescue effort remains highly regarded.

SABU RICHARD

Date of rescue: 06/11/2023

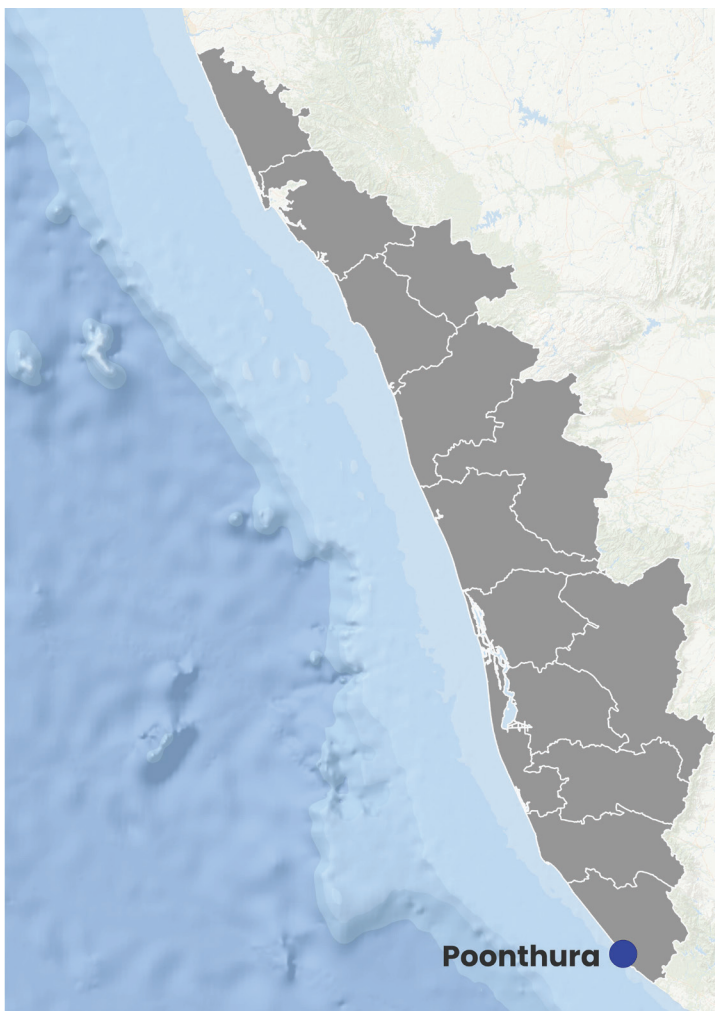
Number of rescue: 0

Type of net: Shore seiner

Size of whale shark: 20 ft

Place of rescue: Poonthura

District: Thiruvananthapuram



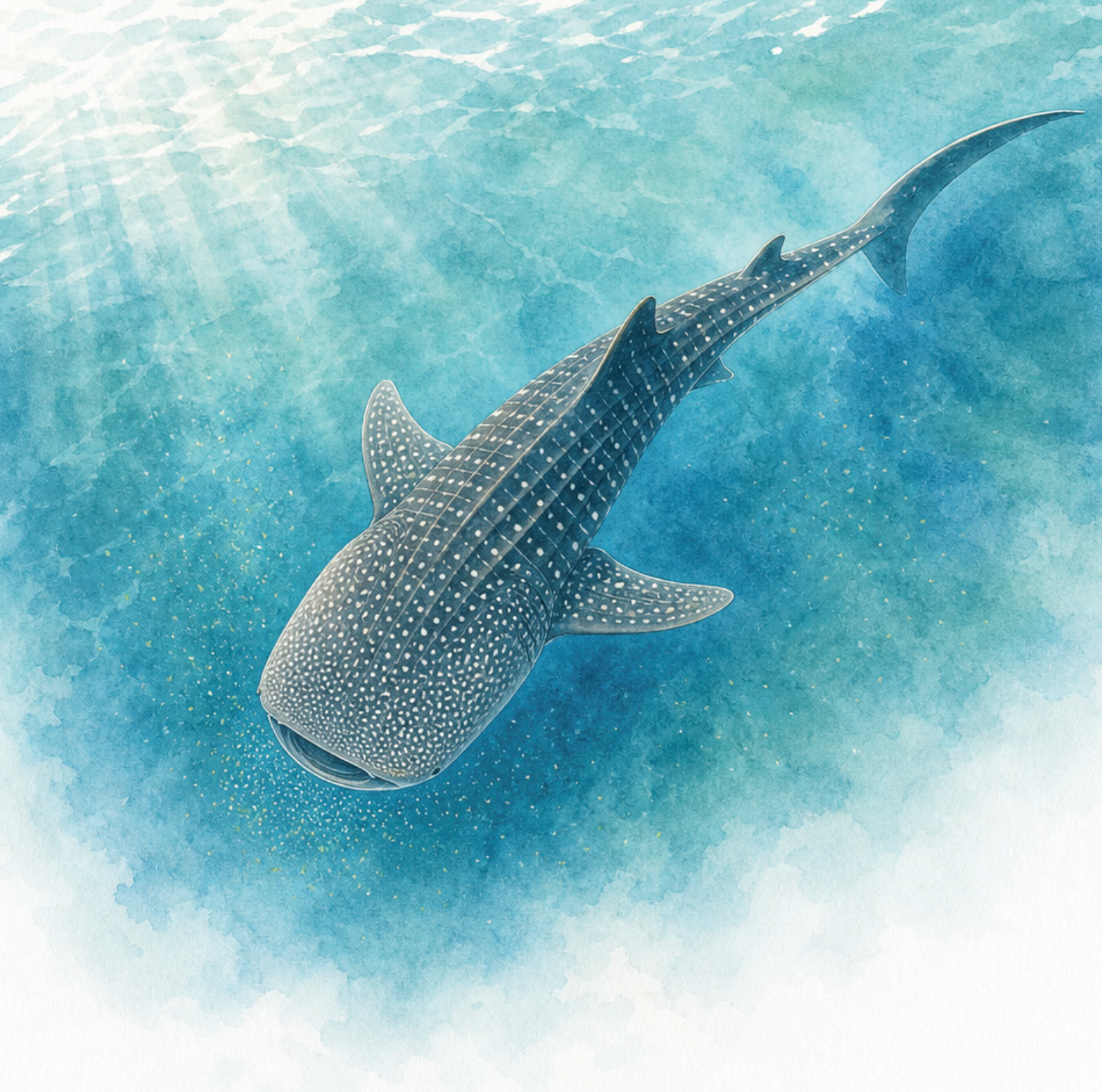
Map showing the landing centre wherein Whale shark rescue operations were conducted

Annexure 01 – Fishermen List

<i>Serial Number</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>District</i>
1	Mr. Abdul Salam	Thannur	Dec-18	Malappuram
2	Mr. Babu	Puthiyappa	Jan-20	Calicut
3	Mr. John Martin (Late)	Shankumugham	Dec-20	Trivandrum
4	Mr. Mohammad Maheen	Beemapally	Apr-21	Trivandrum
5	Mr. Bruno Gomez	Kochuveli	Feb-22	Trivandrum
6	Mr. Jose R	Puthiyathura	15-Dec-22	Trivandrum
7	Mr. Nixon S	Poonthura	21-Dec-22	Trivandrum
8	Mr. Asharaf Ali	Beemapally	23-Jan-23	Trivandrum
9	Mr. Paulose Bernald	Shankumugham	08-Feb-23	Trivandrum
10	Mr. Shahul Hameed	Shankumugham	26-Mar-23	Trivandrum
11	Mr. Kunjumon	Beemapally	16-Apr-23	Trivandrum
12	Mr. Sabu Richard	Poonthura	06-Nov-23	Trivandrum
13	Mr. Shihabudheen	Beemapally	24-Nov-23	Trivandrum
14	Mr. Shinju Jose	Valiyaveli	04-Dec-23	Trivandrum
15	Mr. Raju Stephen	Pallithura	28-Dec-23	Trivandrum
16	Mr. Joboy Lopez	Puthenthopp	12-Jan-24	Trivandrum
17	Mr. Simon Saju	Pallithura	13-Jan-24	Trivandrum
18	Mr. Sajeer Fazil	Muthalapozhi	2023	Trivandrum
19	Mr. Sajeer Fazil	Muthalapozhi	2023	Trivandrum
20	Mr. Sajeer Fazil	Muthalapozhi	2023	Trivandrum
21	Mr. Shaul Hameed	Thumba	19-Mar-24	Trivandrum
22	Mr. Shaul Hameed	Thumba	19-Mar-24	Trivandrum
23	Mr. Shaul Hameed	Thumba	19-Mar-24	Trivandrum
24	Mr. Ashraf Ali	Beemapalli	19-Mar-24	Trivandrum
25	Mr. Sibil M	poothura	23-Mar-24	Trivandrum
26	Mr. Asharaf Ali	Beemapally	06-Apr-24	Trivandrum
27	Mr. Ashraf Ali	Beemapalli	03/10/26	Trivandrum
28	Mr. Jibin B	Muthalapozhi	09-Nov-24	Trivandrum

29	Mr. Andrews Antony	Anchuthengu	10-Nov-24	Trivandrum
30	Mr. Baiju C V	Chettuva	29-Nov-24	Thrissur
31	Mr. Sajeer Fazil	Muthalapozhi	04-Dec-24	Trivandrum
32	Mr. Shaul Hameed	Beemapalli	15-Dec-24	Trivandrum
33	Mr. Davidson Karloose	Beemapalli	17-Dec-24	Trivandrum
34	Mr. Davidson Karloose	Poonthura	06-Jan-25	Trivandrum
35	Mr. Sebastin Rosario	Azhikkal	10-Jan-25	Kannur
36	Mr. Antony Sacharias	Achutheghu	14-Jan-25	Trivandrum
37	Mr. Shinju Jose	Valiya Valli	01-Mar-25	Trivandrum
38	Mr. Shinju Jose	Valiya Valli	01-Mar-25	Trivandrum
39	Mr. Vincent	Vettucad	03-Mar-25	Trivandrum
40	Mr. Shaul Hameed	Bemapally	03-Mar-25	Trivandrum
41	Mr. Baiju Alphonse	Kochuvelli	04-Mar-25	Trivandrum
42	Mr. Peter Sunil	Pallithura	05-Mar-25	Trivandrum
43	Mr. Peter Sunil	Pallithura	05-Mar-25	Trivandrum
44	Mr. Johnson	Pallithura	06-Mar-25	Trivandrum
45	Mr. Peter Sunil	Pallithura	07-Mar-25	Trivandrum
46	Mr. Jelastin	Poonthura	08-Mar-25	Trivandrum
47	Mr. Chiluvayyan	Valiyathura	27-Apr-25	Trivandrum
48	Mr. Jestin	Shankumugham	29-Apr-25	Trivandrum
49	Mr. Jestin	Shankumugham	29-Apr-25	Trivandrum
50	Mr. Shaul Hameed	Bemapally	01-May-25	Trivandrum
51	Al Sameer	Paravoor	10/12/25	Kollam
52	Mr. Patrick M	Kochuthopp	22/01/26	Trivandrum
53	Mr. Bruno Gomez	Vettucad	22/01/26	Trivandrum
54	Mr. Miton Ruby	Kochuvelli	22/01/26	Trivandrum

Record of Fishers Involved in Whale Shark Rescues in Kerala



Annexure 02 – Informative Posters



when you see a...

WHALE SHARK

stranded alive on the shore

STEPS TO TAKE



Inform the forest
department



Take
photographs



Record relevant
information



Cut the fishing net
(if accidentally
entangled) to
release the whale
shark

when you see a...

WHALE SHARK

entangled at sea

STEPS TO TAKE



Inform the forest
department



Take
photographs



Record relevant
information



Remove foreign
elements from
body and cut the
net to release the
whale shark

when you see a...

WHALE SHARK

found dead at shore

STEPS TO TAKE



Inform the forest
department



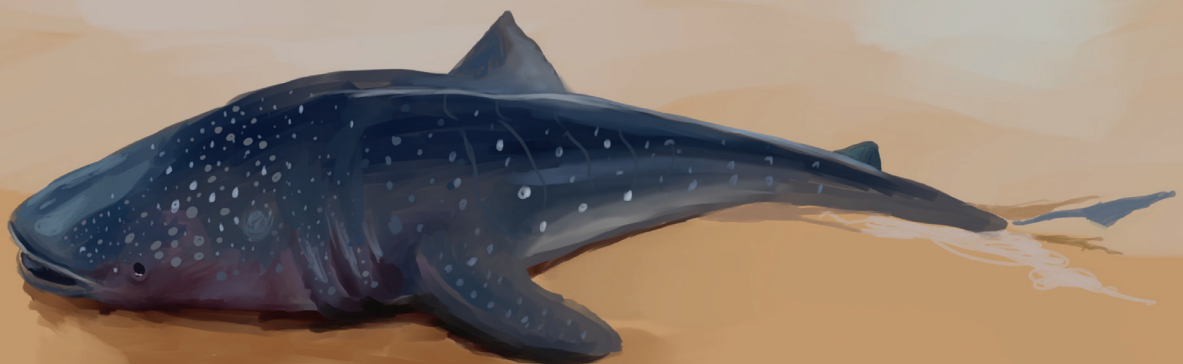
Take
photographs



Record relevant
information



Bury the carcass
after conducting
necropsy



Other WTI Publications

A. OCCASIONAL REPORTS

Tribal Territories:

Impact assessment around the Jarawa tribal reserve, middle and south Andaman Islands

Captive Concerns:

Health and management of captive elephants in Jaipur

Jumbo Express:

A scientific approach to understanding and mitigating elephant mortality due to train accidents in Rajaji National Park.

Fair Concern:

Health and management of captive elephants in Sonpur

Elephant in Exile:

A rapid assessment of the human-elephant conflict in Chhattisgarh

Ganesha to Bin Laden:

Human-elephant conflict in Sonitpur district of Assam

Healing Touch:

Health and management of captive elephants at Kaziranga elephant festivals

Dog and Bull:

An investigation into carnivore-human conflict in and around Itanagar Wildlife Sanctuary, Arunachal Pradesh

Against the Current:

Otters in the river Cauvery, Karnataka

Making Way:

Securing the Chilla-Motichur Corridor to protect elephants of Rajaji National Park

Silent Stranglers:

Eradication of mimosa in Kaziranga National Park, Assam

Living at the Edge:

Rapid survey for the endangered Ladakh urial (*Ovis vignei vignei*) in Leh district of Ladakh Trans-Himalaya

Search for Spectacle:

A conservation survey of the Phayre's leaf monkey (*Trachypithecus phayrei*) in Assam and Mizoram

Sighting Storks:

Status and distribution of Greater adjutant storks (*Leptoptilos dubius*) in the Ganga and Kosi river floodplains near Bhagalpur, Bihar

Bait and Watch:

Popularization of alternatives to dolphin oil among fishermen for the conservation of the Ganges river dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*) in Bihar

No Mast Kalandar:

The beginning to the end of dancing with bears

Awaiting Arribadda:

Protection of Olive Ridley turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) and their nesting habitats at Rushikulya rookery, Orissa

Living with Giants:

Understanding human-elephant conflict in Maharashtra and adjoining areas

Crane Capital:

Conservation strategy for Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone*) habitat in Etawah and Mainpuri Districts, Uttar Pradesh

Deadly Tracks:

A scientific approach to understanding and mitigating elephant mortality due to train hits in Assam

Carnivore Conflict:

Support provided to leopards involved in conflict related cases in Maharashtra

India at the International Whaling commission:

A policy document on India's involvement in the IWC 1981-2003

Hunt for Hangul:

Establishing the presence of hangul outside Dachigam National Park, Jammu & Kashmir

Civet Chronicles:

Search for the Malabar Civet (*Viverra civettina*) in Kerala and Karnataka

Bear Necessities:

A scientific approach to understand and mitigate Human-Sloth Bear conflict in Madhya Pradesh

Pangolins in Peril:

Combatting the illegal trade of Pangolins in India

Counting Stripes & Cells:

Assessing Tiger (*Panthera tigris*) Distribution and the Factors Influencing Tiger Occupancy in the Tadoba-Nagzira Corridor in Central India

Tiger in the Corridor:

Assessing large carnivores presence, status of their prey and habitats of Kanha - Achanakmar corridor

Nest Guardians of the Chambal:

Community based nest protection of riverine birds in National Chambal Sanctuary, Uttar Pradesh

Care for the Coast:

Proceedings of the National Symposium on Coastal & Marine Habitat Restoration, Kochi, Kerala

B. CONSERVATION ACTION REPORTS

Beyond the Ban:

A census of Shahtoosh workers in Jammu & Kashmir

Biodiversity, Livelihoods and the Law:

The case of the 'Jogi Nath' snake charmers of India

Goats on the Border:

A rapid assessment of the Pir Panjal

markhor in Jammu & Kashmir distribution, status and threats

The Ground Beneath the Waves : (2 Volumes)

Post-tsunami impact assessment of wildlife and their habitats in India

Walking the Bears:

Rehabilitation of Asiatic black bears in Arunachal Pradesh

Mountain Migrants:

Survey of Tibetan Antelope (*Pantholops hodgsonii*) and Wild Yak (*Bos grunniens*) in Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, India

Predator Alert:

Attacks on humans by leopard and Asiatic black bear in the Kashmir valley – Analysis of case studies and spatial patterns of elevated conflict

Turning the Tide:

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Once a hub for the commercial exploitation of whale sharks, the Kerala coast has witnessed a remarkable transformation. This change followed a community-focused conservation campaign by the Wildlife Trust of India with support of Oracle, which turned local fishers from hunters into protectors of these gentle giants.

Since 2018, these real heroes have voluntarily rescued and released 54 entangled whale sharks, bravely cutting their nets to free them. This act demands immense courage and compassion, as fishers willingly face physical danger during rescues and significant economic loss from damaged gear and sacrificed daily catch.

This dossier serves as a lasting tribute to these Conservation Heroes—the Guardians of the Gentle Giant—who selflessly choose to give these endangered animals a second chance.



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