

What is a Shark?

Sharks are fish that have skeletons made of cartilage rather than bone, making them **lighter and more buoyant** in water. Over millions of years, they have developed extraordinary senses to help navigate and detect prey.

When we think of sharks, we usually think of sleek, large species that stalk the seas for fishes and marine mammals. Some do just that, but not all. The huge whale shark feeds on plankton. The smallest shark, a dwarf lantern shark is smaller than a human hand and feeds on krill and smaller marine animals. Some sharks are giants — longer than a school bus. Some are tiny enough to hold in your hand. Some spend their entire lives in motion, and some rarely stir from the sea bottom. Yet, they are all sharks.

Sharks have fish features.

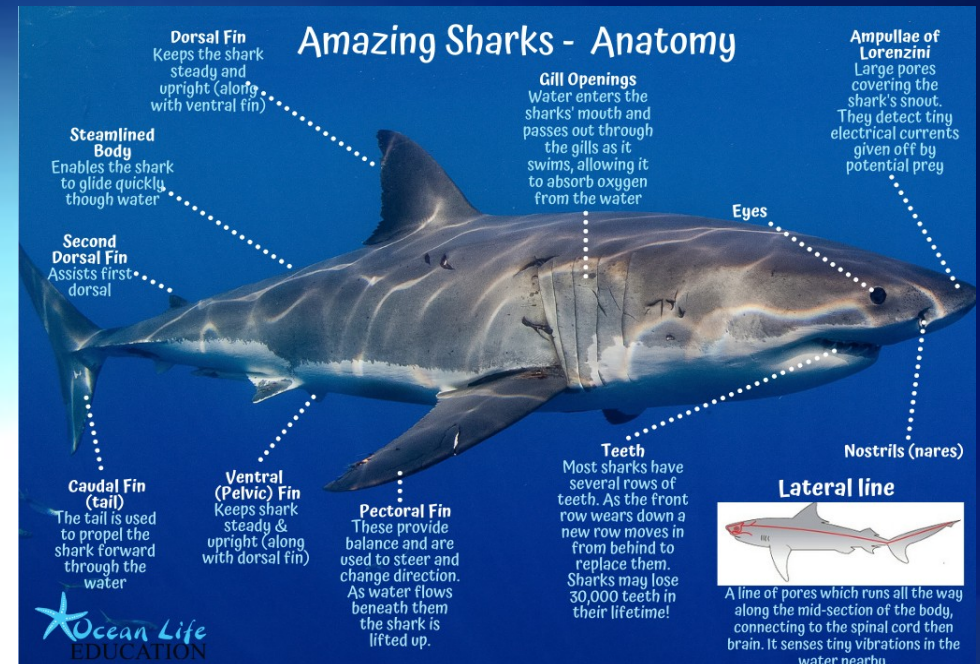
Like other fish, all sharks are cold-blooded. They have a skeleton and fins, live in the **water**, and **breathe** with gills. Most fish in the world are called bony fish. Their skeletons are made of bone, as are ours.

So what's the difference between a shark and bony fish?

One thing that makes sharks different from bony fish is that a shark's skeleton is made of cartilage, not bone. Cartilage is a tough connective tissue. We have cartilage in parts of our bodies too. Push on your nose or squeeze your ear to feel the cartilage.

How many teeth do they have?

A shark has several rows of teeth in its mouth. Some sharks may have up to 30,000 teeth in a lifetime. Sharks bite with the outer row of teeth, but eventually these teeth fall out. A tooth from the row behind moves up to take its place.



There are nearly 500 species of sharks in the world. They inhabit virtually all aquatic environments — from freshwater lakes and rivers to the deepest oceans— and range in size from just a few inches to over 40 feet!

While sharks are often feared as “man-eaters,” the truth is that humans pose a far greater danger to sharks than they pose to us.

Do you worry about being struck by lightning? Probably not! So you shouldn't worry much about being bitten by a shark. In your lifetime, you are 50 times more likely to be struck by lightning than you are to ever be bitten by a shark.

Threats to shark populations include **overfishing**, **by-catch** as a result of fishing operations, and **habitat degradation**. One big problem: the negative public image of sharks can be quite a challenge to conservation efforts.

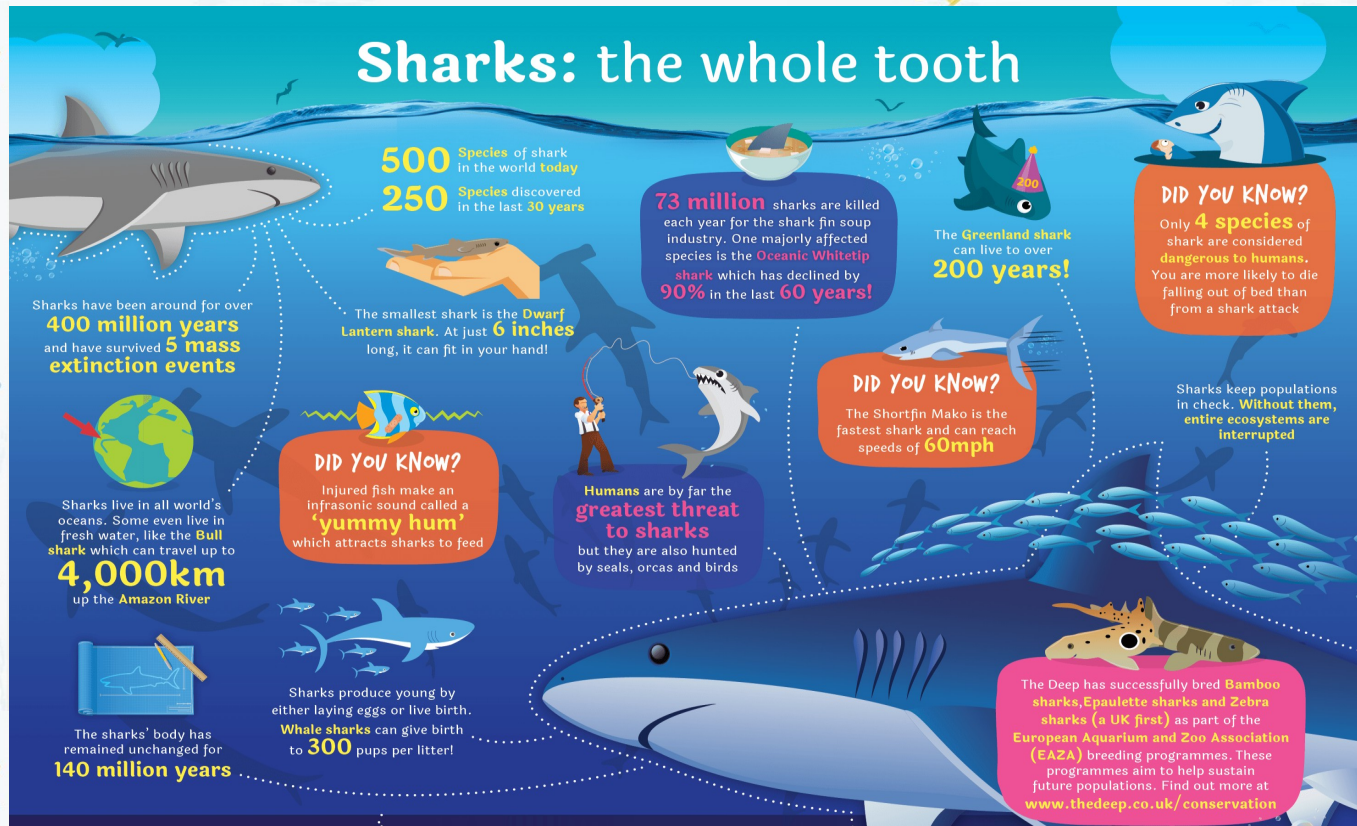
Sharks are slow-growing animals that reach maturity only after several years and produce few young. When shark populations become **depleted**, they may take decades to recover.

Most of the modern-day shark families lived over 100 million years ago, when dinosaurs roamed the earth. In recent decades, many shark populations worldwide have suffered severe declines due to overfishing.

Today they are sought for their meat, fins, oil, teeth, hides and even their cartilaginous skeletons.

Sharks are important apex predators that help keep the ocean food chain healthy and need our protection for survival. Are sharks in danger? Yes! and if nothing changes, more sharks may become **endangered** or even **extinct** in the near future!

Sharks: the whole tooth



What do sharks eat?

While some sharks are not very picky about what they eat, others prefer a specific diet. Hammerhead sharks eat mostly stingrays. Smooth dogfish eat crabs and lobsters. Tiger sharks eat sea turtles. Blue sharks eat squids, and whale sharks eat plankton. Sharks DO LIKE to eat weak, ill, or injured animals because they are easy to catch.

These predators have poor appetites.

Sharks eat far less than most people imagine. Sharks are cold-blooded and have much lower metabolisms than warm-blooded animals. Many sharks can even go several weeks between meals!

Sharks would rather AVOID people.

Like other wild animals, most sharks would rather avoid you. Sharks that have attacked people probably mistook them for food or may have attacked to protect their territory.

Sharks have predators too!

Sharks have several predators, including other sharks, elephant seals, and even killer whales.

Historically sharks were not considered important species. Over the years, people used sharks for food, medicines, vitamins, weapons, jewelry — even sandpaper. Some species are now in trouble. For example, The Great Hammerhead is **endangered**, even though it is not commonly a target for commercial fishing. Fear often drives people to hunt and kill these spectacular sharks because they don't understand them.

Sharks also fall victim to **finning**, the practice of slicing off a shark's fins and tossing its carcass back into the water. Dried fins fetch a high price and are used to make the Asian delicacy shark fin soup. Although shark finning is banned in all U.S. waters and the Atlantic Ocean, finning still occurs legally in most parts of the world it is a driving force for most shark fisheries.

Shark Research

Research into shark reproduction helps us understand shark dynamics, which help us better plan for the future of sharks. In some areas, **tagged** sharks are providing information about growth rates. Once a shark is caught, it is measured, tagged, and released. The shark is re-caught and measured again. The measurements are used to calculate a yearly growth rate.

Over the past 20 years, shark-related tourism has contributed more than \$800 million dollars to the Bahamian economy. A single reef shark is thus worth US **\$250,000** over its lifetime for tourism if kept alive on the reef!

Protecting Our Sharks

In 2011 The Bahamas declared well over 600,000 km² of its waters as a **Shark Sanctuary**, prohibiting commercial shark fishing and the possession, sale and trade of shark products. More than 40 species of sharks journey through the beautiful Bahamian waters. These include the Tiger, Lemon, Great Hammerheads, Bull, Blacktip, Mako, Silky, Nurse and even the massive Whale Shark.

Bimini has emerged as one of the best places on the planet to encounter the Great Hammerhead Shark. These elusive giants have evaded divers for years, but now Neal Watson's Bimini Scuba Center has access!