



WAA WHALE SHARK SANCTUARY WHAT THE PROPONENTS SAY



VOLKER BASSEN



came to Kenya in 1990 as a young, intrepid diving instructor. He has always been dedicated to marine conservation and

set up the East African Whale Shark Trust in 2005. With the significant decline in the local whale shark population he established the Waa Whale Shark Sanctuary, a private, public partnership in marine conservation together with the Waa community.

www.whalesharkadventures.org

The Waa whale shark sanctuary plan has been on the drawing board since 2008. It is a PPPC project (Private Public Partnership in Conservation) between SeaQuarium and the Waa community with an estimated Ksh. 300,000,000 going into the Waa community and Kwale county council coffers over the next 5 years. These funds will be generated from tourists who will be able to swim with these gentle giants paying a fee. A unique shareholders agreement states that 30 percent of SeaQuarium's annual dividends shall go back into sustainable marine conservation projects through

the EAWST (East African Whale Shark Trust) who will run these accounts open to public scrutiny. The Sanctuary shall also serve as a rescue and rehabilitation facility for injured marine animals and will have veterinary expertise available 24/7 provided by SeaQuarium and Dr Bo Lundstrom, a new trustee of the EAWST who specializes in this unique field.

Two juvenile whale sharks will be kept for a limited time period and released during peak whale shark season. Each released shark will be equipped with a satellite tail tag and can be followed through EAWST

dedicated website. The project has been anchored through the Waa BMU (Beach Management Unit) laws and regulations under the Ministry of Fisheries who have been involved since the very beginning of this initiative. The Waa Whale Shark Sanctuary will work together with Fisheries, Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute (KMFRI) and different universities in order to further marine science in Kenya and develop much needed expertise since our vision 2030 is to one day be able to breed this majestic fish in Kenya. The project also has full support from world-renowned whale shark

PHOTOS BY: VOLKER BASSEN



researcher Dr Keiichi Sato and his team of scientists. They have been involved since 2010 and have assisted us with the enclosure netting specially designed not to entangle any marine animals. During our 9-month sea trials, not a single marine animal was caught.

WAA WHALE SHARK SANCTUARY PROJECT GROUND-BREAKING AND INNOVATIVE

It is sad that any flaws or mistakes done by GIBB Africa during the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has been turned around to cast

shadow over the Waa Whale Shark sanctuary project as well as questioning the integrity of the proponents. Neither SeaQuarium nor the EAWST has any expertise in conducting EIA reports. We hired GIBB Africa for this purpose, hence we should not be held responsible for flaws presented within the EIA. We merely make sure they are addressed to everyone's satisfaction. Having seen the national and international media campaign against the Waa whale shark sanctuary project based on these facts, we feel disappointed that the project was branded as controversial while in

fact it should have been branded as both innovative and ground-breaking.

Furthermore, this project will not set off any precedent. The precedent was set a long time ago and this criticism is rather late. The need to fence conservation areas (for the sake of the species) is only getting stronger. We need to showcase these majestic fish the same way we showcase our elephants and rhinos. There is no better way to incite the desire to conserve them. By showcasing these gentle giants, we will enhance our reputation as a world-renowned wildlife destination, adding one more to the big 5, making Kenya the BIG 6 destination.

As we had expected, National Environment Management Agency (NEMA) did not issue a license for the Waa whale shark sanctuary because of the joint efforts of Raabia Hawa, David Obura and the Born Free Foundation (among others) to stop the Waa whale shark sanctuary. Since the public NEMA hearing in May earlier this year, we have been working very hard to address all questions and concerns using David Obura's comments as a template. This is because all comments received from the opposition basically contained the same questions, concerns and complaints as Obura's. We also hired David Obura's former colleagues (marine biologists and registered NEMA lead experts as himself) to supply the missing data Obura pointed out. This proves our commitment to address all questions and concerns. Regarding NEMA's 6 points as to why this initiative shouldn't be licensed; we totally disagree with 5 of those points and our appeal to the NEMA tribunal will address these as well as provide the additional information as requested by David Obura and his peers. Meanwhile the Australians are now planning to construct a SeaQuarium holding white sharks in captivity for a limited time-period. To keep white sharks in captivity is notoriously difficult but Trevor Nottle and his team are confident. This because they will be kept in their natural habitat the same as for the Waa whale shark sanctuary.●