Misleading
The claims made by Bassen about his project are largely misleading.

Firstly, the most similar experience that a tourist can have swimming with whale sharks in a reef/coastal pen is in Fenjiezhou Island (Hainan Province, southern China), where fishermen and local entrepreneurs (such as Bassen’s consortium) enclose whale sharks they have caught, but with minimal animal care. The comparison with the Georgia and Okinawa aquaria, which are major international institutions that have captive whale sharks in addition to thousands of other fish and expert staff numbering in the hundreds, is tenuous at best. Second, while it is true that swimming with whale sharks is a magical experience, this is done at a dozen locations in East Africa for half the stated price, in the wild rather than in pens, so the value and pricing of the enclosure project appears to be more in aid of profit-making rather than conservation. Third, the benefits to local conservation of the project are tenuous at best, and though it is dressed up as a ‘public-private partnership’ between Bassen’s three entities (one trust and two businesses) and the local fishing community, it has more the appearance of a business venture of willing buyer-willing seller. There is no clear documentation of roles and responsibilities, benefit sharing, assumptions or risk, and both local community and government appear enticed by an unlikely income stream from fee-paying guests.

If the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) submitted by Bassen’s project, and mentioned in your news piece as a standard for approval, is an indicator of the competence of the group in conducting their business ethically, then it must be concluded that that competence is low. The EIA was submitted without any treatment of impact on the migration of these fish, assumptions or risk, and both local community and government appear enticed by an unlikely income stream from fee-paying guests.

If you’d like to comment on African travel or conservation issues, or discuss the contents of Travel Africa magazine, please write to:

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or send an email to editor@travelafricamag.com with Letter to the Editor in the subject line. If your letter is published we’ll give you a one-year subscription (or extension) to Travel Africa magazine.

Apalled by project
I am not in the habit of writing letters to magazines or newspapers, but I was appalled to read of the proposed captive whale shark snorkelling experience in Kenya. This is nothing but exploitation justified on pseudo-conservation grounds. Either Mr Bassen is unaware, or chooses to ignore, the other places it is possible to snorkel with these magnificent fish truly in the wild: Ningaloo reef in Western Australia, Mexico, Belize, Philippines, Honduras and Mozambique to name a few!
Please correct this misinformation Mr Bassen is spreading. Hopefully the licence will not be granted, as the impact on the migration of these fish cannot be known without further study. Thanks for a great magazine.
DR RUTH MAXWELL, UK

How can one even think of keeping in captivity a migratory species like the whale shark? It is the height of cruelty.  
TIJU AZIS, KENYA
Whale sharks stir controversy

A new marine enclosure is on the verge of opening this month that will allow holidaymakers in Kenya to snorkel with live whale sharks. While vocal groups of conservationists believe that catching whale sharks and confining them for this purpose is cruel and unnecessary, Volker Bassen, the founder of the Waa Whale Shark Sanctuary near Mombasa, says the monies raised from the €100 ticket price will fund schemes to stop the docile fish from being wiped out.

"If you ever have a chance to swim with whale sharks, you will never forget the magical experience," Bassen says. "You will become an ambassador for the protection of these majestic animals for the rest of your life."

He adds that, before visitors swim with the world's largest fish they will be taught about whale shark conservation. They must also wear life vests and stay at least three metres from the animals while in the water, with no flash photography permitted.

The 120ha area will be surrounded by an underwater polyethylene net, measuring 2000m by 600m. The only other areas on the planet where it's possible to swim with whale sharks are found off Japan's Okinawa Island and USA's Georgia Aquarium.

The final hurdle for Bassen is the environmental impact assessment that is being evaluated by the National Environment Management Authority. A license cannot be granted for the project without its approval. □

＊ Travel Africa magazine would love to hear your thoughts on the whale shark enclosure. Email editor@travelafricamag.com with WHALE SHARKS in the subject line.