

Tracking Basking Sharks

Basking sharks are the second largest species of fish in the world. They have huge mouths, but they aren't dangerous to humans because they only eat tiny sea creatures. This article describes a project that aims to find out more about basking sharks by tracking their movements.

Scientists use a new technology to track endangered basking sharks as the creatures reach UK shores

The average basking shark may be the size and weight of a double-decker bus, but these giant fish are still notoriously hard to find.

Scientists have so far struggled to track the endangered fish, meaning that very little is known about the species. But all this is about to change - thanks to the amount of plankton* found in UK waters at this time of year.

The plankton is attracting the sharks - one of just three shark species that eat plankton - directly into the reaches of researchers. As a result, scientists are now poised to start tagging the sharks for the first time, allowing them to track their movements via GPS.

The move forms part of a ground breaking project off the Cornish coast that seeks to protect basking sharks.

The GPS devices, which look like mini-submarines and are fitted with special fins, will be inserted just beneath the skin into the top section of muscle next to the dorsal fin using a 12ft-long "window cleaner's" pole.

Every time the tag comes to the surface of the water, it sends a message to six satellites which triangulate* its position.

The project aims to discover valuable information about the behaviour of these huge but elusive sharks - such as their diving habits, where they feed and their migration patterns. The results gleaned from tagging in areas such as Porthcurno and Sennen Cove will be used as the basis for a plan to conserve the sharks.

"We are still in the dark as far as basking sharks are concerned. I do honestly find it fascinating that such a massive animal can swim around in our seas and yet we know so little about it", said Lucy Hawkes of the University of Exeter, who is working on the tagging project with the Marine Conservation Society.

Dr Hawkes and her team will be on standby in the coming weeks, ready to leap into action whenever a basking shark is sighted off the Cornish coast. They are calling for the public to report their sightings by phoning a "tagging hotline".

Glossary

plankton – tiny creatures floating in the sea

triangulate – work out

Question 1

Why does the basking shark's diet play an important part in the project?

Question 2

In your own words, summarise the following information:

- The GPS devices, which look like mini-submarines and are fitted with special fins, will be inserted just beneath the skin into the top section of muscle next to the dorsal fin using a 12ft-long "window cleaner's" pole. Every time the tag comes to the surface of the water, it sends a message to six satellites which triangulate* its position.

Question 3

What do you think the word "elusive" means? Check your answers in the dictionary.

Question 4

Explain how Lucy Hawkes feels about basking sharks.

Question 5

Which phrase in the following lines shows that the tracking team will react quickly when a basking shark is spotted?

- Dr Hawkes and her team will be on standby in the coming weeks, ready to leap into action whenever a basking shark is sighted off the Cornish coast. They are calling for the public to report their sightings by phoning a "tagging hotline".

Question 6

Why do you think a project like this would have been possible 100 years ago?

Question 7

Do you think tracking basking sharks is a good or bad idea? Explain your answer.