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WWF Tanzania Country Office
Plot 350 Regent Estate
P. O. Box 63117
Dar Es Salaam Tanzania
Tel: +255 22 270 0077
panda.org/tanzania

Media Release

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WWF promotes the conservation of whale sharks in Mafia to mark World Fisheries Day 2017

Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania: November 17, 2017: The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in Tanzania, in collaboration with The Fisheries Department of the Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries and Mafia District Council (MDC) are to publicly unveil a whale shark billboard and sculpture in the heart of Mafia Island, declaring Mafia as the Home of Whale Sharks. The event which will take place on 21st November in Mafia aims at promoting whale shark conservation under the theme "*Tuwalinde papa potwe. Uhai wao ni faida kwetu.*"

Research results have identified environmental and other factors affecting presence of whale sharks in Mafia Island - one of the world's leading whale shark residency sites. The large fish's existence is threatened, among other factors, by fisheries activities; a main source of livelihood for many of Mafia island's community members.

WWF-Tanzania's, in collaboration with SeaSense, the Whale Shark Conservation Society (WCS), Mafia District Council (MDC) and the Tanzania Fisheries Research Institute (TAFIRI), is implementing a project that seeks to streamline whale shark conservation and management in Mafia island and strategically stabilize whale shark population - estimated to be 100-140 individuals, mostly juvenile males ranging from 2.5 - 9.5m - in priority seascapes to at least 2014 baseline levels, by 2020.

Whale sharks in Mafia island suffer significant disturbance as they tend to feed together with small pelagic fish and entangled in purse seine (*mtando*) fishing operations targeting those fish, mostly sardines (*dagaa*).

Preceding the public unveiling of the whale shark sculpture and billboard on 21st November will be a series of awareness activities in primary schools in Mafia, engaging school children to understand whale shark biology, as well as their ecologic and socio-economic importance in Mafia. The students will be invited to submit essays on their reflections and personal role in whale shark conservation - the winner will then be appointed guardian of the whale shark sculpture in Kilindoni, Mafia.

"The presence of whale sharks in the Mafia waters is like icing sugar on a cake as the biodiversity in Mafia itself is world class" stated Dr Mathias Igulu, WWF Tanzania's Marine Programme Coordinator. He added that "until recently, whale sharks were not commonly found in Mafia and therefore the results of over 10 years of conservation efforts is not yet clear.

"The environment has proven to be conducive for the whale sharks to co-exist with other fisheries and marine resources in the area. However, the challenge lies in how long we can maintain the current state of the environment."

Dr Igulu further expressed that "Mafia, being an island, depends largely on marine resources and collective efforts must be made to conserve and protect them", adding that "whale shark tourism has the potential to generate significant income to the District council and people of Mafia island".

MDC, together with stakeholders in the fisheries sector, developed a code of conduct to guide tourist interaction with whale sharks - however, adherence has been poor.



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World Fisheries Day is celebrated every year on November 21 by fishing communities throughout the world, highlighting the critical role fisheries resources have on our lives. It aims to draw attention to the problems related to fisheries like overfishing, unsustainable fishing techniques, habitat destruction, inadequate methods of fishing, and other threats to our freshwater and marine resources.

Additionally, this day will bring attention to the pollution problems in Tanzania's coastal areas and ocean. On this day, the participating members will address these issues and discuss measures to solve this problem.

Ends

For more information, contact:

Joan Itanisa : Jitanisa@wwftz.org | +255 767 248 452
Communications Manager
WWF Tanzania

Gaudensia Kalabamu : Gkalabamu@wwftz.org | +255 683 702 800
Communications Officer
WWF Tanzania

About WWF

WWF is the world's leading conservation organization, working in 100 countries for nearly half a century. With the support of almost 5 million members worldwide, WWF is dedicated to delivering science-based solutions to preserve the diversity and abundance of life on Earth, halt the degradation of the environment and combat climate change. WWF has been active in Tanzania since 1990 although its presence in the country goes way back to the 1960s. It remains committed to the vital work being done in the country to save its unique and irreplaceable biodiversity.