

SEARCH

Scientists capture marine beauty

Michelle Wheeler, The West Australian
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Fish at Salomon Atoll. Picture: Anne Sheppard

Scientists from the University of WA have captured world-first images of the planet's biggest marine sanctuary.

Researchers dropped baited video cameras into the ocean at the Chagos Archipelago, about 500km south of the Maldives, filming sharks, fish, stingrays, coral and other marine life at depths never before seen by humans.

It is the first time the area, part of the British Indian Ocean territory, has been surveyed deeper than the 15-20m easily reached by divers.

UWA's Centre for Marine Futures director Jessica Meeuwig said she had never seen so many sharks.

"What was really striking, just in the first review of the video, is how many big fish there are, how many big schools of small fish there are and then there are just beautiful sharks everywhere," she said.

"One of the highlights for me was seeing five really fat scalloped hammerhead sharks cruising past at about 65m.

"We saw quite a few silvertip sharks. We had tiger sharks, we had tawny nurse sharks, including a rather large individual that had two smaller individuals tagging along with her and sharks aren't known for parental care, so that was kind of interesting."

In 2010, the British Government announced the creation of the world's biggest no-take marine reserve at Chagos, with a protected area of more than half a million square kilometres.

Professor Meeuwig said 208 cameras were set up around the archipelago at depths of up to 80m.

"What we see in the Chagos is that healthy ecosystems are just unbelievable in terms of the biomass of fish that they support, the numbers of top predators that they support," she said.

"There's an opportunity for Australia to achieve those kinds of marine conservation outcomes."

The research was conducted in February and March with marine scientists from the Zoological Society of London, Oxford University, the University of Warwick and Queensland's James Cook University.

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