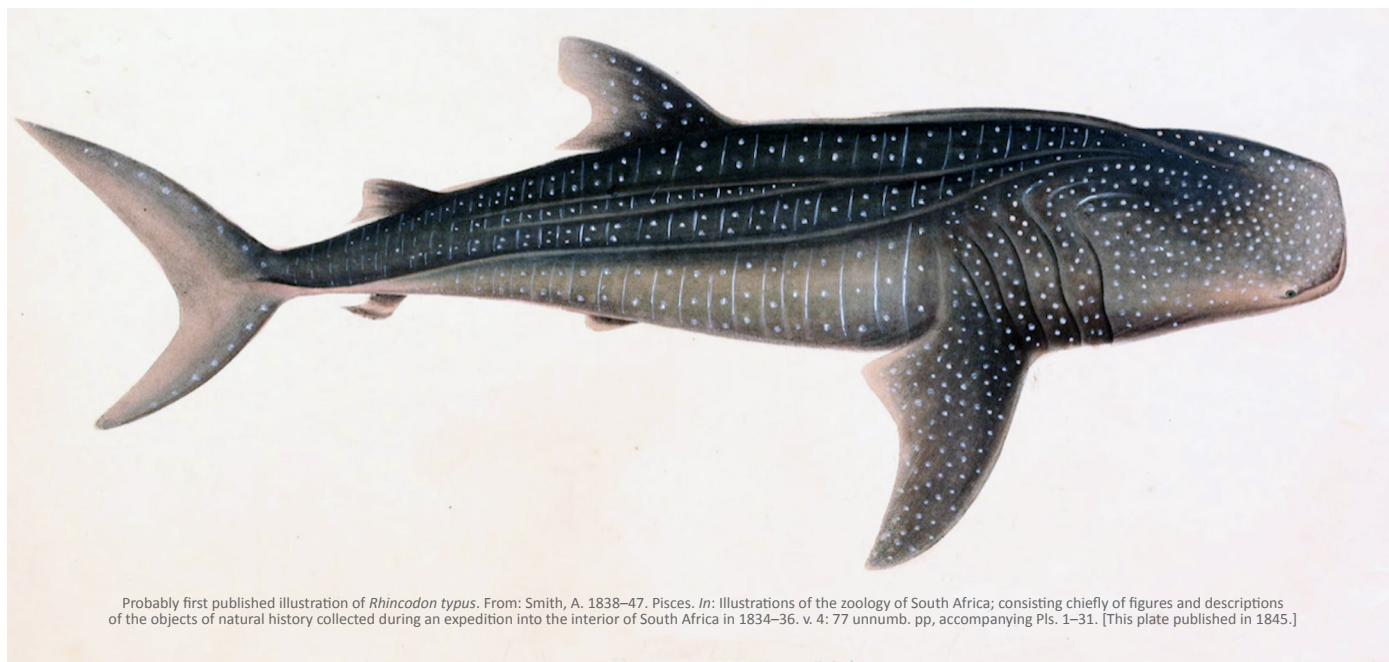


## Order ORECTOLOBIFORMES

## Whale Shark

## Family RHINCODONTIDAE

Müller &amp; Henle 1841

***Rhincodon***

Smith 1829

*rhinc*, presumably a typographical error for *rhinē* (Gr. ρίνη), rasp, but often mistranslated as *rhynchos* (Gr. ῥύγχος), snout; *odon*, Latinized and grammatically adjusted from the Greek nominative ὀδούς (*odoús*), tooth, referring to small, slightly curved teeth, “placed in longitudinal rows, and altogether so disposed towards the anterior edges of jaws as to exhibit the resemblance of a rasp or file lying across each”

***Rhincodon typus* Smith 1828** serving as type species of the genus

**A “whale” of a mistake**

Andrew Smith (1797–1872), a Scottish military physician, explorer, ethnologist and zoologist, collected many South African sharks and coined the scientific name of the largest fish (or non-mammalian vertebrate) still alive on the planet: the Whale Shark, *Rhincodon typus* (maximum known size, 18.8 m).

Unfortunately, the Internet has not been kind to the etymology of *Rhincodon*. Everyone agrees that *odon* means “tooth.” But some anonymous writer or researcher translated *rhin* as “snout,” creating the nonsensical construction “snout tooth” for a shark that does not have teeth on its snout. (Nor does any other shark, for that matter.) This wouldn’t be so bad if this bit of misinformation hadn’t crept into several online resources.

While *rhin*, as an abridgement of *rhinós* (Gr. ῥινός), genitive of *rhís* (ῥίς), can mean nose or snout (depending on the context), it means something else in the case of *Rhincodon*. It means rasp. Indeed, Smith’s original description is unambiguous about the meaning of the name: “Teeth small, slightly curved, placed in longitudinal rows, and altogether so disposed towards the anterior edges of jaws as to exhibit the resemblance of a rasp or file lying across each ...”.

Note: It appears that Smith was unaware that *rhine* also happens to be an ancient name used for sharks, referring to their rasp-like skin. This is reflected in the names of several other shark genera, including the Basking Shark (*Cetorhinus*) and the cat sharks (*Scyliorhinus*).

Uncorrected mistakes are no stranger to this name. Smith originally published it as *Rhiniodon* in a little-seen South African newspaper article in 1828, but a presumed printer’s error changed it to *Rhincodon* in a more widely seen journal article published the next year. This mistake wasn’t noticed until 1972. By that time *Rhincodon* was prevalent in the scientific literature, so the ICZN voted in 1984 to conserve the latter misspelling over the original correct spelling for the sake of nomenclatural stability.