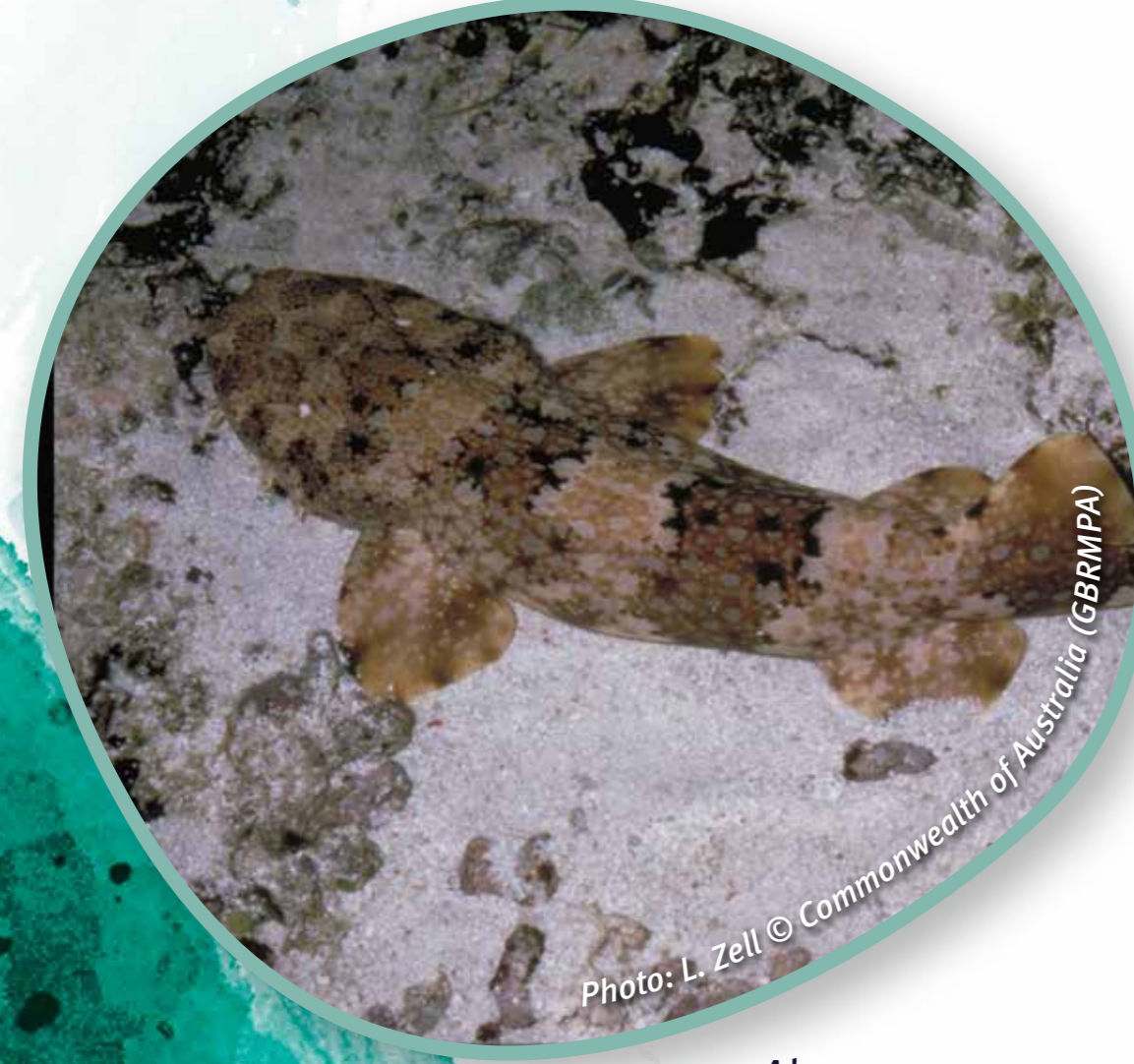


# Sharks and stingrays



Above:  
Wobbegong shark

There are about 134 species of sharks and rays in the Great Barrier Reef. Sharks range from small bottom-feeding sharks like the wobbegongs to the larger more active species like tigers and hammerheads.

Most fish have skeletons of bone, but sharks and rays have skeletons made of cartilage. Cartilage is lighter and more flexible than bone.

All sharks and rays are predators and have jaws and teeth adapted to their lifestyle. Fish-eating sharks have many rows of razor-sharp teeth. The first rows are used for feeding while the other rows are new teeth that will replace the old ones. Sharks with saw-edged teeth (tiger shark) can cut through tough skin and turtle shells. Sharks and rays like epaulette sharks and cowtail stingrays that eat crabs and molluscs, have hard crushing plates to grind up tough shells.



Left: Blacktip reef shark

Most rays glide along the sea bottom looking for, and sometimes digging for, molluscs and crustaceans in the sand. Their mouth lies on the underside of their body and their teeth are very small.

Sharks and rays reproduce either by laying eggs in tough little cases, or by giving birth to fully formed young. When eggs are laid the cases are left to develop among algae or coral and the young hatch after several months.

Many rays have a poisonous barb in their tail which they use to defend themselves. It can inflict an extremely painful wound – though rarely deadly. Helpful hint: Always shuffle your feet when walking through the water to avoid stepping on a ray.



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Right, from top:  
Cowtail stingray;  
blue-spotted fantail ray



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