Tarpon are prized sportfish, but their populations may be declining. They are slow-growing fish whose populations may be unable to keep up with fishing pressure and habitat degradation. Tarpon live in freshwater rivers, brackish estuaries, and the open ocean. They use all of these habitats to complete their life cycle.

**Juvenile Diet**
- Small, live-bearing fishes
- Copepods
- Estuarine shrimps
- Aquatic insects
- Amphipods

**Adult Diet**
- Mullets
- Crabs
- Remora shrimps
- Fishes

**Natural Predators**
- Sharks and humans are the main predators of adult tarpon. Juvenile tarpon are preyed upon by larger fish and birds such as woodstorks and herons.

**Tarpon are able to breathe air and are seen at the surface gulping or rolling. They breathe air using their swim bladder, which acts as a rudimentary lung or breathing organ. They increase air gulping when dissolved oxygen levels are low and breathing using gills becomes difficult.**

**Ecological and Economic Significance**

With its large size and supreme ability to fight and jump, tarpon are a prized catch-and-release fish. Because they have bony flesh and often have ciguatera (a poison that builds up in the tissue of some fish), tarpon are seldom used as food. Mortality from recreational fishing and diminishing habitats may have caused significant declines. Assessing tarpon populations is difficult because of their wide range throughout the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean and their complex life cycle.

**How You Can Help**
- Use circle hooks to prevent ‘gut-hooking’ during catch-and-release fishing
- Handle fish gently with wet hands and never through the gills
- Avoid taking fish out of the water
- Release fish where predators are not present and only when the fish is able to swim on its own
- Protect and prevent damage to mangroves and seagrasses

**Tarpon are found far upstream in the freshwater portions of rivers and marshes, as well as estuarine habitats including seagrass, salt marsh, and mangrove. As adults, they roam far and wide in the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean and are found along coasts and over coral reefs.**

**Leptocephalus Larval Stage**
- 5.5–24 mm (0.25–1 in)

**Metamorphic Larval Stages**
- 4–7 weeks, 24–39 mm (1–1.5 in)
- Larvae settle inshore, rapidly shorten and then grow again as they transform into miniature versions of adults.

**Eggs**
- Eggs hatch into slender, transparent, leptocephalus larvae that drift in the open ocean for one month.

**Tarpon spend their early juvenile period in shallow, stagnant mangrove marshes.**

**Subadult 1–11 years, 20–120 cm (8–47 in)**
- Subadults migrate regionally through estuaries and coastal rivers.

**Adults travel between rivers, reefs, and the open ocean. Adult tarpon grow slowly and do not reach sexual maturity until they are between 7 and 13 years of age. Tarpon can reach a weight of 127 kg (280 lbs) or more.**

**Adult 10–55 years**
- 90–200 cm (35–80 in)
- Although flashy above water, a tarpon’s silvery scales mirror their surroundings below water to give them valuable predatory stealth.