

Time for R&R?

By Heather Heenehan



Tourists in Makako Bay, Hawaii

When you fly into Kona, Hawaii, the lure of swimming with dolphins starts on the airplane with images of sun-kissed beaches, azure waters, and smiling dolphins swimming merrily alongside tanned tourists. Once you step onto the island, ads for excursions that will take you to the best “dolphin-swimming spots” abound. What those images and ads don’t tell you is that you will be visiting the dolphins in their resting area. In my studies with SAPHIRE (the Spinner Dolphin Acoustics, Population Parameters and Human Impacts Research Project), I saw this firsthand.

I first visited Kona in 2010 and spent a week waiting for the spinner dolphins to appear. Finally, when I was starting to believe they didn’t exist, as I sat on the lava rock overlooking Honokohau Harbor I saw the small toothed whale in the dolphin family that everyone wants for a dive companion, *Stenella longirostris longirostris*. I was in awe. But being aware of the species’ need for daytime rest, I was also alarmed.

To recover from feeding offshore at night, Hawaiian spinner dolphins move into shallow waters to rest during the day, safe from predators. Here they were in a busy little bay

on the Kona coastline dodging boats and swimmers and scuba divers.

Research completed in the 1970s and 1980s by Kenneth S. Norris (University of California, Los Angeles, and University of California, Santa Cruz) established a baseline of spinner dolphin habits, distribution, social structure, and more. Norris found that a group of dolphins would feed in deep waters at night, then return to a bay to rest and socialize. Their preferred daytime habitats were shallow and sandy—in other words, ideal snorkeling coves.

This past March I was part of a SAPHIRE research group that studied the spinner dolphins in Kealakekua Bay from cliffs and by boat. We took notes on diving patterns, group cohesiveness, and responses to humans (though not us, we hoped, as we kept a distance). We took pictures of the dolphins to identify individuals and also got a chance to listen to their whistles, clicks, and other vocalizations.

One day in Kealakekua we watched hordes of curious people jump off paddleboards and kayaks into a group of dolphins. We saw two people grab onto a dolphin’s fin

and go for a ride. We moved from Kealakekua Bay to Honaunau Bay, a National Historical Park a little farther south on the Kona coast, and witnessed a similar scene. To Hawaiians, Honaunau is a “Place of Refuge,” but it doesn’t seem to be one for the dolphins.

Back in my acoustics lab, my small team and I scour terabytes of underwater audio recordings, pinpointing the presence of dolphin vocalizations. We try to classify the animals’ different sounds and understand how they change throughout the day and throughout the year.

Perhaps some of my research, and that of the other SAPHIRE participants, will help inform policy decisions aiming to conserve spinner dolphin populations in Hawaii. These dolphins deserve their right to rest just as much as everyone who visits Hawaii’s blue waters.

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