NOAA FISHERIES
Pacific Islands Regional Office

Reducing Human Disturbance to Wild Dolphins

Of the many different kinds of dolphins and whales that live in the waters around the Hawaiian Islands, one species has become a year-round favorite attraction – the Hawaiian spinner dolphin. Every day of the year, visitors book boat tours, rent kayaks and paddle boards, and even swim to dolphins from shore to catch a glimpse of these animals in their natural habitat. Viewing marine mammals in the wild is a lucrative business worth an estimated $1 billion USD in 2008. It has even been reported that the United States has the world's largest marine mammal viewing industry with approximately five million participants – 250,000 of which specifically view dolphins (IFAW, 2009). The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) is concerned, however, that the health of Hawaiian spinner dolphins could be negatively affected by these daily close encounters with humans and watercraft.

Unlike most other whales and dolphins, Hawaiian spinner dolphins have a unique characteristic where they rest during the day, and hunt and feed at night. At dusk, spinner dolphins move offshore to hunt for fish, shrimp, and squid. At dawn the dolphins return to calm shallow coves and bays to rest, socialize and tend to their young. Interruptions to this daily resting period could have long-term consequences for the animals. Like humans, these dolphins need to their rest to stay healthy.

Scientists have already observed changes to Hawaiian spinner dolphin behaviors in areas where there have been repeated occurrences of encounters with humans. Spinner dolphins have been observed avoiding people and vessels within resting areas and bypassing traditional resting bays altogether. As a result, according to recent studies, some Hawaiian spinner dolphins are not getting enough rest and are being disturbed. Unfortunately this reality is not unique to Hawaii. Dolphin species in other parts of the world are also being affected by tourism, and long-term studies have revealed that the impacts from tourism are affecting the dolphins' health and reproduction.

A recently published article in *Natural History* (see article here) draws attention to these concerns in Hawaii. This article reveals that dolphin viewers along the South Kona coast of Hawaii Island are engaging in activities with wild spinner dolphins that may be considered a violation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). One of the key provisions for marine mammal protection

established by the MMPA is a prohibition on take. This means that it is illegal to harass, hunt, capture or kill, or attempt to do any of these activities to a marine mammal. Activities such as surrounding wild dolphins or grabbing their fins may result in harassment, which is subject to enforcement actions.

The MMPA does not prohibit commercial tours from viewing marine mammals in the wild as long as they conduct themselves in a manner that does not harass or injure the animals. Attending a dolphin- viewing tour may be a great way to see and enjoy these animals in their natural environment. NOAA Fisheries strongly encourages viewing activities that give the animals space to engage in their natural behaviors. NOAA Fisheries does not support, condone, approve or authorize activities that involve closely approaching, interacting or attempting to interact with marine mammals in the wild. This includes attempting to swim with, pet, touch or elicit a reaction from the animals. Such interactions may result in "harassment" as defined in the MMPA and should not be attempted.

NOAA Fisheries promotes Responsible Marine Wildlife Viewing and offers the following guidelines. These guidelines do not replace Federal or state law (e.g., pursuit and feeding of marine mammals is **prohibited** by Federal law).

1. Remain at least 150 feet (50 yards) from marine mammals (dolphins, whales, and Hawaiian monk seals). (*Federal law prohibits approaching within 100 yards from humpback whales).
2. Observe turtles from a distance.
3. Bring binoculars along on viewing excursions to assure a good view from the recommended viewing distances.
4. Do not attempt to touch, ride, or feed turtles.
5. Limit your time observing an animal to 1/2 hour.
6. Marine mammals and sea turtles should not be encircled or trapped between boats or shore.
7. If approached by a marine mammal or turtle while on a boat, put the engine in neutral and allow the animal to pass. Do not attempt to interact with or elicit a reaction from the animals, even if they approach you.
8. Boat approach should be from the rear of the animal. Any movements with the animals should be slightly behind the group so as to not cut off the path of the dolphins, or inhibit their choice of travel.

Dolphin SMART

Due to the expansion of the dolphin-viewing tourist industry and the concerns associated with disturbance to local dolphin populations, NOAA Fisheries has been trying to work cooperatively with commercial operators to promote responsible viewing practices nationwide. Our current conservation program called "Dolphin SMART" is one aspect of our overarching "Protect Dolphins" campaign that is designed to help minimize the disturbance to wild dolphins.

Originally started in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary in 2007, Dolphin SMART is a one-of-a-kind program that combines responsible viewing and advertising practices; educational trainings and materials; field research; and outreach to benefit both dolphins and participating dolphin-viewing businesses. Since the original 2007 program implementation, the program has rapidly expanded to a national level and now includes operators in Orange Beach, Alabama, along the southwest Florida coast, and in the Hawaiian Islands.

Dolphin SMART is a collaborative effort between government, non-government organizations and research. The four main sponsors of the program are NOAA Fisheries, National Marine Sanctuaries, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, and the Dolphin Ecology Project. Working together with local businesses and partners, the program aims to promote responsible stewardship of wild dolphins in coastal waters by minimizing the potential of wild dolphin harassment and aiding in dolphin conservation.

The Dolphin SMART program is designed to:

- Minimize the potential of wild dolphin harassment caused by commercial viewing activities.
- Reduce expectations of close interaction with wild dolphins in a manner that may cause harassment.
- Eliminate advertising that creates expectations of engaging in activities that may cause harassment.
- Promote stewardship of local coastal waterways.

Program participation is open to commercial businesses conducting wild dolphin tours or any commercial vessel that may opportunistically view wild dolphins. By joining this exciting conservation program, Dolphin SMART recognized businesses agree to practice responsible wildlife viewing and advertising that helps aid in dolphin conservation. By choosing Dolphin SMART operators, the public supports businesses that have made a commitment to help protect these dolphins. Additionally, Dolphin SMART is a win-win for businesses, guests, and the dolphins, because it promotes practices that will help sustain a healthy dolphin population for future viewing enjoyment. Hawaii currently has 4 Dolphin SMART recognized businesses: Hawaii Nautical, Ocean Joy Cruises, and Hoku Naia on Oahu, and Holoholo Charters on Kauai.

Businesses not involved in wild dolphin viewing can also join the Dolphin SMART initiative by becoming a Dolphin SMART Proud Supporter. Proud Supporters play an important role in the Dolphin SMART program by raising awareness and educating the public about responsibly viewing wild dolphins, by encouraging people to book Dolphin SMART (through the recognized businesses), and by supporting local businesses that aid in dolphin conservation. Additionally, Dolphin SMART Proud Supporters also become stewards for the environment and dolphin conservation! Many businesses have already joined the cause to help wild dolphins by becoming a Dolphin SMART Proud Supporter. For a complete list of Dolphin SMART Proud Supporters, please visit our website at: www.dolphinsmart.org and click on the "Proud Supporters" link.

When booking a wild dolphin viewing tour, "Look before you book!" and seek businesses with the Dolphin SMART logo and current year on boat decals, flags, and business advertisements. Or, visit www.dolphinsmart.org to find Dolphin SMART businesses.

In the waters of Hawaii, everyone can become a dolphin steward while being rewarded with seeing fascinating, natural, wild behavior by booking Dolphin SMART and viewing wild dolphins responsibly! Please help ensure future generations will also have healthy dolphin populations to enjoy in their natural habitat by conserving our wild dolphins today!

For more information about wild spinner dolphins and the negative ways it affects wild dolphins, please visit: http://www.fpir.noaa.gov/PRD/prd_swim_with_wild_dolphins.html

For more information on Hawaiian spinner dolphin management and background educational materials, please visit: http://www.fpir.noaa.gov/PRD/prd_spinner_EIS.html.