

Hurricane and Red Tide Impacts on Dolphins Among Four Projects Awarded in Specialty License Plate Program Grants

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FT. PIERCE, FL. — The Protect Wild Dolphins (PWD) specialty license plate program has just awarded \$302,000 in grants to four dolphin research, information and awareness programs in the State. Funds will support important work to locate and identify dolphins using acoustic detection devices; develop a code of conduct for dolphin tour operators; a public service announcement that will convey that it is both illegal and dangerous to feed marine mammals; and an investigation of the impacts to dolphins and their environment from recent hurricanes and episodes of red tide.

This year's awards bring the total grant funding distributed since the plate's inception in 1999 to nearly \$2.8 million. In addition, over \$4.5 million has supported Harbor Branch's dolphin research programs, including an ongoing health assessment of Indian River Lagoon dolphins and the rescue and care of stranded dolphins. Each year a \$30,000 fund is also established to reimburse other authorized organizations for expenses incurred while providing care and assistance to sick and injured marine mammals.

Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota will receive two grants. Working with the PWD program, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), Mote Marine Laboratory will use the \$100,000 grant to develop public service announcements that convey that it is both illegal and harmful to feed dolphins. Dolphins accustomed to begging for food become less able to fend for themselves and these feeding interactions can lead to physical harm to the persons feeding the dolphins as these are large, powerful animals. The other award to Mote Marine Laboratory provides \$59,879 to investigate how hurricanes and red tides in the Port Charlotte area have impacted this habitat for dolphins.

Florida State University has been awarded \$70,541 to study the feasibility of tracking and identifying individual dolphins using acoustic detection technologies. This project will involve setting up a monitoring system at a Big Bend study site for the purpose of advancing the means of determining where populations of dolphins go and why. Combining this with monitoring of prey populations and movements, as well as water quality parameters can begin to provide important clues to the motives and objectives of dolphin population movements.

The DolphinSMART project has been awarded \$72,410 to develop, implement, and monitor a voluntary code of conduct for dolphin tour operators. Just as it is illegal and unwise to feed wild dolphins, it is also illegal and potential dangerous to approach wild dolphins, even if it is done by an experienced tour operator. Operators who learn and practice the code of conduct will be able to advertise their participation and compliance and will be recognized by the program. The objective is to teach and encourage methods of dolphin observing that do not involve, befriending or harassing the animals.

Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution, a Florida non-profit research organization (www.hboi.edu) administers all proceeds from the sale of the Protect Wild Dolphins specialty license plate. These research grants from the program are awarded based on a competitive peer-review proposal process. The program makes final grant awards based on recommendations from an independent and unbiased panel of dolphin researchers and resource managers.

The Protect Wild Dolphins specialty license plate is available at all Tax Collectors'™ offices. The \$20 annual surcharge supports dolphin research and conservation in Florida. During the month of August, Harbor Branch is partnering with 28 Florida counties to promote sales of PWD specialty license plates. Premiums and incentives will be provided to auto owners who purchase a PWD license plate. Interested customers can also visit www.hboi.edu and click on the specialty plates to purchase one online.

For more information about the program, please go to: <http://www.protectwilddolphins.org>, or contact Mr. Jan Petri at 772-465-2400 x241 or 772-216-1459 (mobile).

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