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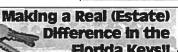
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# Sanctuary launches dolphin program

Posted-Friday, January 19, 2007 6:52 PM EST

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Goal's to promote responsibility by tour operators

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has joined with nongovernmental organizations to launch a program designed to protect wild dolphins in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary through a partnership with tour operators and their clients.

The new Dolphin SMART program will recognize businesses that meet standards to promote responsible viewing of wild dolphins and prevent harassment. It's similar to the state's Clean Marina Program, in which marinas that meet certain state environmental standards get a special designation.

The acronym SMART signifies the basic principles of viewing etiquette:

- Stay at least 50 yards away.
- Move away slowly if the dolphins show signs of disturbance.
- Always put the vessel engine in neutral.
- Refrain from swimming with, touching or feeding wild dolphins.
- Teach others to follow these practices.

Sanctuary spokeswoman Cheva Heck said the sanctuary worked with National Marine Sanctuary Program headquarters, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society and the Dolphin Ecology Project to establish the program, with partial funding from Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution.

Businesses that offer trips to view wild dolphins will be eligible to participate in the first phase of Dolphin SMART, followed by booking agents and concierge

services in the second phase.

The program kicks off with an introductory meeting Tuesday from 7 to 8:30 p.m. at the Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center at the Truman Annex waterfront

The meeting will offer the opportunity to learn about program requirements. hear about incentives for participation and sign up for the first Dolphin SMART training.

For more information, contact Celeste Weimer at 743-2437.

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