



For Immediate Release

Contact: Courtney S. Vail
480-678-7977
courtney@wdcs.org

'Dolphin SMART' program launched to protect wild dolphins in the Florida Keys

January 23, 2007-*East Falmouth, Massachusetts*. Today, WDCS launches a new voluntary education and recognition program aimed at promoting responsible viewing of wild dolphins in the Florida Keys. This program, called Dolphin SMART, is the result of a collaborative effort between WDCS and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Marine Sanctuary Program, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Dolphin Ecology Project, and local dolphin-watch tour operators. The program aims to enhance marine stewardship in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS) and is partially funded by a grant through the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution.

Dolphin SMART will recognize dolphin-watch tour operations that meet standards to promote responsible viewing and prevent disturbance and harassment of wild dolphins in the FKNMS. The acronym **SMART** signifies the basic principles of viewing etiquette: **S**tay at least 50 yards away; **M**ove away slowly if the dolphins shows signs of disturbance; **A**lways put the vessel engine in neutral; **R**efrain from swimming with, touching or feeding wild dolphins; and **T**each others to follow these practices.

Businesses that offer trips to view wild dolphins will be eligible to participate in the first phase of the Dolphin SMART program, followed by booking agents and concierge services in the second phase. All Dolphin SMART participants must agree to program criteria, training and education, and evaluation requirements. The Dolphin SMART program offers participation incentives for operators who voluntarily follow codes of conduct and other 'best practice' program criteria, while educating their customers about the importance of minimizing wild dolphin disturbance and harassment. The program also includes an important research component to help provide insight about the health and welfare of local wild dolphin populations in Key West.

"We have developed this innovative and multi-faceted program over the course of several years, and with the interest and commitment of local dolphin tour operators," said Courtney S. Vail, US policy officer for WDCS-North America. "Wild dolphin harassment and disturbance is a real conservation issue in Florida, and because of the huge tourist draw in the Keys, we are excited about assisting with the development and implementation of this program that will make a genuine contribution towards the protection of wild dolphins in the area."

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary is home to a resident group of bottlenose dolphins that are targeted by a growing number of commercial operators for their dolphin-watch excursion

activities. The heightening amount of human activity dramatically increases the risk to wild dolphins, disrupting their natural behaviors such as migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding and sheltering. Dolphins can also be injured by boat and propeller strikes if they become habituated to feeding and other illegal activities by commercial and recreational boaters.

Wild bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) disturbance and harassment is a growing problem in some parts of the United States, especially in certain areas of Florida. NMFS recognized the magnitude of this issue in 1997 when they developed a targeted campaign to educate the public about issues associated with feeding and harassing wild dolphins and promote techniques for responsibly viewing wild dolphins. This 'Protect Dolphins Campaign' focuses on viewing dolphins responsibly from a distance, and avoiding illegal and other activities that bear the potential to harass wild dolphins. A growing body of scientific literature has continued to reveal the biological significance of human-induced activity on wild dolphin populations, specifically vessel-based tourism associated with whale and dolphin watching operations. Marine mammal experts in Florida have also recognized the serious threats to local, resident dolphin populations resulting from inappropriate human interactions and activities associated with recreational and commercial boaters and vessels.

"Because of the increasing popularity of marine-based tourism, especially wild dolphin viewing in Florida, interactions with wild dolphins are increasing despite existing regulations, viewing guidelines, and outreach efforts over the past decade," continues Ms. Vail. "We are hopeful that this positive, voluntary program will provide the encouragement necessary to reduce and eventually eliminate detrimental human-dolphin interactions in the Keys and elsewhere in Florida."

Source: WDCCS