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in the news: environment

Sanctuary aims to keep dolphins wild

Dolphin SMART campaign focuses on charter operators

By STEVE SANOSKI
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A pair of playful coastal Atlantic bottlenose dolphins glide alongside Gary Stanyer's boat and emerge from the water slightly to take a look at a group of tourists who've come to an area off Key West known as "the dolphin playground."

"This is what it's all about," says Stanyer, owner and operator of Dolphin Safari Charters, "just letting the dolphins' natural curiosity bring them to the boat without even having to try to approach them."

Stanyer's approach — or lack of approach — to showing his customers wild dolphins has earned him high praise from the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Along with his on-the-water techniques, Stanyer's responsible advertising of Dolphin Safari Charters has prompted the sanctuary to certify his business as the first to be Dolphin SMART.

Dolphin SMART is a voluntary, free program available to all wild dolphin charter opera-

tors in the Keys. Aimed at promoting responsible viewing of wild dolphins, the program is being paid for by grants mostly, but also in part by the sale of Florida's "save wild dolphins" license plates.

"It basically aims to show operators how they can follow the Marine Mammal Protection Act and conduct responsible wild dolphin-watching tours," says Cheva Heck, sanctuary spokeswoman.

The program promotes dolphin-watching methods such as never getting in the water with or touching dolphins, always putting the boat motor in neutral when dolphins are near and keeping at least 50 yards away from all wild dolphins.

"If dolphins approach a boat out of curiosity, then that's their own choice," says Heck. "What we don't want is people trying to approach wild dolphins and interrupting their natural routines."

The disruption of dolphins' daily routines, such as feeding, sleeping, playing, migrating and mating, is considered harass-



Photo by STEVE SANOSKI

Dolphin Safari Charters' passengers watch dolphins from a distance during a recent trip out to what's known as the "dolphin playground." Dolphin Safari is the first Key West charter company to be certified as Dolphin SMART by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

ment under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. Ongoing harassment of dolphins can lead to them abandoning an area they normally frequent.

One area the sanctuary is concerned about is located with-

in its federally protected waters not far off Key West. Known as "the dolphin playground," it's the place dolphin-watching tour operators usually take their customers, and is also a popular area for recreational boaters.

Although the Dolphin SMART program can't take the credit, Heck said the sanctuary is happy to report incidents of dolphin harassment have declined in "the dolphin playground" since the sanctuary initially began putting the program together three years ago.

"Things have gotten better in the past few years as a result of the operators sort of self policing themselves," Heck says. "The number of businesses has also declined considerably, so that's also put less pressure on the dolphins."

The number of dolphin-watching operators in Key West

jumped from six to 30 at one point a few years ago, said Heck. However, many have since been forced out of business by hurricanes and a sluggish economy.

Roughly 10 to 12 dolphin-watching boats are on the water these days, and Stanyer said the camaraderie between them has greatly improved.

"There's fighting amongst us when it comes to getting people on our dock, but once we're out on the water we're friendly and working together," says Stanyer. "All of the problematic operators have basically gone out of business."

The charter operators keep in regular contact while on the water, Stanyer says, and strictly keep to a one pod per tour boat rule.

See **DOLPHINS** / 8

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How to be Dolphin SMART

- ◆ Stay at least 50 yards from dolphins
- ◆ Move away cautiously if dolphins show signs of disturbance
- ◆ Always put your engine in neutral when dolphins are near
- ◆ Refrain from swimming with, touching or feeding wild dolphins
- ◆ Teach others to be Dolphin SMART





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The Florida Keys & Key West
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in the news: development

Plan for 6,000 homes at top of Keys scuttled

By CURTIS MORGAN
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A landowner has officially canceled plans to build a town of 18,000 on environmentally sensitive wetlands near Florida City just north of the Keys.

An attorney representing landowner Atlantic Civil has withdrawn an application with regional planners to build Florida City Commons, a massive project that has been a lightning rod in the battle over whether to push back Miami-Dade County's urban development boundaries.

Atlantic Civil attorney John Shubin said that the company's owner, Steve Torcise, had assessed the considerable political and regulatory challenges facing the project and decided instead to pursue his family's "traditional business activities" of rock mining and farming.

"There is absolutely no plan whatsoever that is waiting in the wings for residential development," Shubin said.

Environmentalists were elated the controversial mega-development was dead but weren't ready to drop the fight over the future of the nearly 1,000-acre property, which is just northeast of the junction of U.S. 1 and Card Sound Road in South Miami-Dade.

"It was a bad project in a bad location, and I'm really happy they've come to their senses," said Cynthia Guerra, executive

director of the Tropical Audubon Society. "I'm not sure mining down there is going to be a better alternative. The future of that property is a big question mark."

One thing apparently not in the future is building a community twice the population of Florida City on the marshy tract between Everglades and Biscayne national parks some 1 1/2 miles south of the county's Urban Development Boundary, a line intended to limit suburban sprawl.

That was the plan proposed three years ago by Atlantic Civil and Lennar Homes, the housing giant that had partnered on a project envisioning 6,000 dwelling units, nearly 400,000 square feet of shops, two schools, 240 hotel rooms and a cinema multiplex.

Atlantic Civil has been negotiating or dropping projects as the housing market weakened nationwide, but Shubin would not say what role Lennar or the stagnant real estate market had played in the decision. He said the Torcises had shared Lennar's "vision" to build workforce housing for Florida City, which has annexed the property.

"Unfortunately, that vision was not shared by everybody," Shubin said.

Atlantic Civil consultants had argued the project had been singled out unfairly for criticism, saying much of the property had been previously farmed and was far from pristine. Two-thirds of the

tract — about 1,800 acres — also has been set aside already for conservation and developers pitched the potential of using it for Everglades restoration projects to improve water flows to Biscayne Bay.

But its size and location also raised wide concerns, and not just with environmentalists.

Regional planners worried about flooding, drains on a tight water supply and clogged roads.

Florida Keys residents and state emergency planners worried about hurricane evacuation gridlock on Card Sound Road and nearby U.S. 1. The political climate also chilled, with then-Gov. Jeb Bush also weighing in against the idea of moving Dade's development line.

"It really shows that when the community comes together and says we don't want development between two national parks, that good things can happen," said Sara Fain of the National Parks Conservation Association.

Joseph Goldstein, another Atlantic Civil attorney, sent a letter March 1 to the South Florida Regional Planning Council formally pulling the proposal.

But Atlantic Civil sent up the first signal that the deal was falling through in January by filing zoning and permit applications for a rock-mining operation and fewer than 200 homes. Now, Shubin said, the latest plans include no homes at all.

Program enhances business

DOLPHINS / From 4

The Dolphin SMART program is focused on dolphin-watching charter operators' advertising techniques as well as their business practices. To be accredited in the program, advertisements must not make guarantees about seeing dolphins, cannot depict people swimming with dolphins or show dolphins in a traditional begging pose (with their heads back and mouths open).

"We want to make sure they're giving people the right impression when they're selling the tours," says Celeste Weimer, Dolphin SMART program coor-

dinator. "Once they're on the boat, we want them to provide an educational briefing about wild dolphins and the Dolphin SMART program, so they understand why we're doing what we're doing."

The sanctuary began offering informational meetings and program training to local dolphin-watching operators in January. Heck said representatives of at least seven Key West businesses have attended the meetings thus far and are in some stage of being certified as Dolphin SMART.

Upon successful completion of the training and evaluation, businesses like Dolphin Safari

Charters will receive materials such as flags and decals to identify them as Dolphin SMART participants to their customers.

Stanyer said he's very proud to be the first operator to receive accreditation through the program, and hopes all of his colleagues follow suit for the benefit of the dolphins as well as the dolphin-watching industry.

"I have 7- and 5-year-old children, and I want this place to be as beautiful as it is now when they get old enough to really appreciate it," he says. "Being a part of the program also enhances my business. It would be silly not to participate."