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Florida's Wildlife Tourists Get Dolphin Smart

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Available for logged-in reporters only

Description

A new program, called Dolphin SMART, has been introduced in Florida to allow tourists to choose a responsible wildlife tour operator, and to protect wild bottlenose dolphins in the Florida Keys. The Dolphin SMART scheme lets visitors to the Florida Keys check if tour boat operators behave responsibly around the marine mammals when choosing which company to use.



Newswise — The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, in partnership with WDCS, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, the National Marine Fisheries Service, NOAA's National Marine Sanctuary Program and the Dolphin Ecology Project have launched the programme to promote responsible dolphin watching and try to reduce the impact of tourism on Florida's wild dolphins, within the popular Florida Keys area.

The acronym SMART stands for:

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

WDCS Dolphin SMART Programme officer, Courtney Vail said, "The Dolphin SMART programme will hopefully prove an incredible success for everyone working to protect Florida's unique wild bottlenose dolphins. Responsible dolphin watching is a 'win-win' situation which means that both boat operators and tourists can benefit from incredible encounters with wild dolphins in their natural habitat, for years to come!"

Operators certified as Dolphin SMART under the scheme have demonstrated a commitment to the protection of Florida's wild dolphins and to educating the public about the animals. One of the key messages of the scheme is to remind tourists not to try to 'swim with', touch or feed the animals.

Courtney continued, "Interacting too closely with these wild animals can disturb them to the point where they no longer carry out natural behaviours like nursing, breeding and resting, and may even drive the whole group away from

Image Gallery



Capt Jake Ferguson

Dolphin Safaris, first DolphinSMART accredited operator

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critical habitats, like the Florida Keys."

Tourists visiting the Florida Keys and wanting to see the wild dolphins can be sure the operator they choose is Dolphin SMART by looking for a current year flag or sticker.

The programme also includes vital research into the effects of tour boats on the dolphin residents. Researchers with the Dolphin Ecology Project collect information on individual dolphin identification, population numbers and animal behavior around tour boats. It is hoped that the research will help to assess the success of Dolphin SMART and to ensure that Key West's wild dolphins continue to thrive.

Wild dolphin watching has become hugely popular with tourists throughout the world where responsible tour operators provide their passengers with an opportunity to learn about dolphins by viewing them in their natural environment. The clear, shallow waters of Key West, Florida, where a handful of the resident bottlenose dolphins frequent a small area of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, has become a prime location for dolphin watching in the United States.

Editors' notes

More information and a current list of Dolphin SMART operators can be found online at <http://www.dolphinSMART.org> or by contacting Celeste Weimer at 305-743-2437 x22.

In the UK, a similar scheme called The Dolphin Space Programme (DSP) was launched in 1995 to protect wild bottlenose dolphins in the Moray Firth in Scotland. The Dolphin Space Programme is an accreditation scheme for wildlife tour boat operators. The aim of the DSP is to encourage people who go out to observe dolphins and other marine wildlife to "watch how they watch" and to respect the animal's need for space. Further information can be found at <http://www.dolphinspace.org>.

In New England, WDACS (NA), in partnership with the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary offers See A Spout, Watch Out!, a program to educate recreational boaters regarding safe boating practices around large whales. Further information can be found at <http://whales.org/spout/index.htm>.