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New dolphin tour operator recognised under Dolphin SMART

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Bottlenose dolphins, Florida Keys, (c) L. Engelby, Dolphin Ecology Project

WDCS and its partners, including NOAA's Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and Dolphin Ecology Project, today recognised the second charter operator under a new program designed to protect wild dolphins. Key West's Sunny Days Catamarans officially joined the Dolphin SMART program after successfully meeting standards that promote responsible viewing of wild dolphins.

WDCS, along with its partners, established the program which is currently funded by NOAA Fisheries and the 'Protect Wild Dolphins' license plate funds through Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution. The acronym 'SMART' is a reminder of the basic principles of dolphin viewing etiquette:

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

'We are excited to support a program that is ecologically responsible and promotes safety for the local dolphin and education for the visitors,' said Kathy Eymann, owner of Sunny Days Catamarans. 'It wasn't even a question of if we would participate. With all of our trips, we have always tried to be as environmentally conscious as we can. And we believe that it is extremely important for us to continue to educate our crew so that they in turn can educate our passengers.'

Upon acceptance into the voluntary program, Dolphin SMART charters receive flags and stickers and permission to use the Dolphin SMART logo in their advertising. Each year, participants are evaluated to ensure they're continuing to meet program standards. By looking for the current year on flags and logos and checking the updated participant list, visitors to the Florida Keys seeking the thrill of seeing dolphins in the wild can ensure the tour operator they select is Dolphin SMART.

'As additional tour operators come on board, the strength of the program will hopefully be evidenced on the water. Preliminary reports from Dolphin SMART researchers conducting surveys of wild dolphins and vessel interactions in the Keys this summer indicate an improvement in the operation of, and communication between, commercial vessels,' said Courtney Vail, US Policy Officer for WDCS. 'We hope the trend continues and as more become involved with the program.'

WDCS, The Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, is an international charity dedicated to the conservation and welfare of whales, dolphins and porpoises worldwide. Established in 1987, and with offices in the United States, Great Britain, Argentina, Germany, and Australia, WDCS works to reduce and ultimately eliminate the continuing threats to cetaceans and their habitats, while striving to raise awareness of these remarkable animals and the need to protect them in their natural environment. WDCS achieves these objectives through a mix of research, education and awareness raising initiatives.

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary protects 2.896 square nautical miles of important marine habitat, including maritime heritage resources, as well as coral reef, hard bottom, seagrass

meadows, mangrove communities and sand flats. NOAA and the state of Florida manage the sanctuary.

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