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## NATURAL TRAVELER

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### Dolphin Rescue in the Florida Keys

Story by John H. Ostdick

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Eleven of the rescued dolphins were nursed back to health (seven of them as a group in May about 14 nautical miles off the Florida Keys near Key Largo) and a baby calf who could not be released back into the ocean was sent to Gulf World in Panama City.

The last two in captivity, one of which was #372, were released September 12 after an extended rehab at MMC in Key Largo. At one point Weimer was warned that 372's tail would never be straight again, that there was too much scar tissue and she would never be releasable.

"I was bound and determined to prove them wrong, and sure enough that girl is straight as a board and swimming free once again," Celeste says. "She was fully healed and doing aerials before we released her. She was a real rock star."

Weimer calls the moment that 372 hit the open ocean "one of the best moments of my life."

"I've worked so closely with her these last six months, and have been by her side through so many obstacles (miscarriage, physical therapy for her tail curve, companions dying, moving to new homes, etc). I miss her so much, but couldn't be happier right now. I was able to have a front row seat for her release. I was just so excited to see her slide off that board and hit the deep blue once again. She and 134 (the other dolphin released that day) took off side-by-side."

Marine biologists tracked both of the dolphins as they were released, and a week and a half later they were making several deep dives a day in a very deep trench just off the north shore of Cuba. *(For a timeline summary of 372's rehabilitation and release, visit <http://www.fkmmrt.org/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=29>.)*

Although the overall dolphin loss is devastating to the volunteer groups, any survivors are incredibly fortunate, and a joy.

"These animals already died once," Mader says. "Any that we can save, basically we are giving them a second chance."

Dolphin Watching: Be SMART Out There

Viewing wild dolphins in their natural habitat can be a thrilling experience. However, when humans approach wild dolphins too closely, move too quickly, or make too much noise, they increase the risk of disturbing the dolphins' natural behaviors, such as migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, and sheltering.

"In 2004 the number of businesses conducting dolphin watch tours out of Key West surged to almost forty," explains Celeste Weimer, a marine biologist who coordinates a dolphin watching education program for Key West tour operators. "There was such an increase in the number of boats around the animals on a daily basis that harassment was becoming quite an issue. It was that year that concerned individuals first met to devise a plan to minimize the harassment from tour boats. Two and a half years later, the Dolphin SMART program was launched."

Dolphin SMART, a partnership program developed by NOAA's National Marine Sanctuary and National Marine Fisheries Service, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, and the Dolphin Ecology Project, seeks out dolphin watch boat companies in the Florida Keys to promote responsible viewing of wild dolphins.

"We just recently signed on our third participant," Weimer says.

The program's basic guidelines are simple, and logical:

- 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.

Dolphin SMART offers participation incentives for businesses that follow the program criteria and educate their customers about the importance of minimizing wild dolphin harassment. It also includes an important research component that provides insight about the daily lives of the local, wild dolphin population in Key West.

For more information, visit [www.dolphinSMART.org](http://www.dolphinSMART.org).

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