

Keys to a great trip

Courtney Vail reveals why Florida is the SMART place to see dolphins

Florida is all about dolphins. The imagery is everywhere, and for good reason. No matter where you stay in Florida, there are myriad opportunities to see dolphins in the wild.

Called the 'sunshine state' for its wonderful weather, Florida's white sand beaches give way to sky-blue waters, teeming with life. At the southernmost tip of the State, the chain of islands called the Florida Keys straddle the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. Designated as a National Marine Sanctuary, the 2,800 square nautical miles of coastal and oceanic waters surrounding the Keys include the most extensive living coral reef in the US, as well as sea-grass meadows and mangrove islands which provide habitat for a rich diversity of marine species.

Within the Sanctuary, there is a small area that is home to a resident group of bottlenose dolphins. It's a special place where the calm, clear waters provide an excellent year-round home for these animals and an ideal setting to observe them in their natural habitat.

Book Dolphin SMART!

With no limits to the numbers of operators allowed to conduct dolphin-viewing activities in this small area of the Keys, a greater potential exists for the dolphins to be disturbed. As a result, WDCS partnered with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries), Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and a local dolphin research organization, the Dolphin Ecology Project, to develop Dolphin SMART.

The initiative promotes responsible

viewing and stewardship of wild dolphins in the national marine sanctuary, while recognising commercial businesses that voluntarily participate. This one-of-a-kind programme combines viewing and advertising criteria, training, field research, education, as well as incentives for the dolphin-viewing businesses that participate.

Dolphin Safari Charters, owned and operated by Gary Stanyer, was the first operator to become recognised under the Dolphin SMART programme. 'Acquiring Dolphin Safari Charters was the realisation of my dream to live beside and work on the ocean,' says Gary. 'Now I have the pleasure and satisfaction of safely and conscientiously sharing my love of the ocean and its wildlife with approximately 300 of my clients a year.'

'I have always had great respect for dolphins in the wild, and want to help preserve them in their natural habitat for generations to come. The Dolphin SMART programme impressed me as the perfect way to accomplish this.'

Choosing wisely

Unfortunately, across Florida, not all dolphin attractions are so careful about the animals' welfare. Dolphin interaction programmes, from touching and feeding, to swimming alongside the animals are increasing in range and popularity. A love for dolphins may encourage people to want to get closer, but many are unaware of the negative impacts.

Swimming with wild dolphins is, potentially, an exhilarating and



WDCS/ COURTNEY VAIL



GARY STANYER/ DOLPHIN SAFARI CHARTERS

WDCS's
Courtney Vail
on a SMART
accredited boat



The Florida Keys: heaven for dolphin watchers, and, if tours are managed properly, for dolphins too

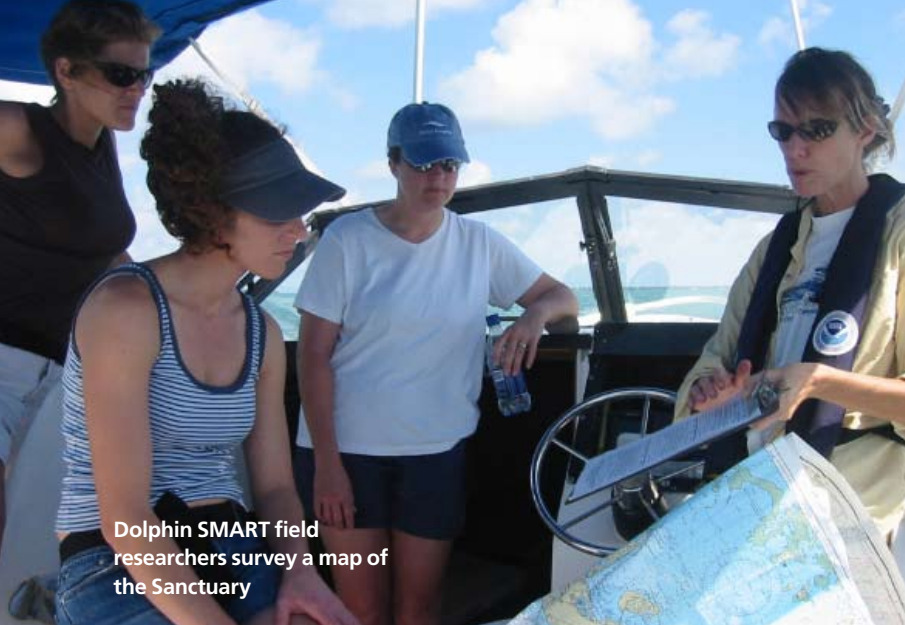


Dolphin Safari Charters proudly displays its Dolphin SMART status

GARY STANLEY/DOLPHIN SAFARI CHARTERS

unforgettable experience, however it is very difficult to ensure that the encounter takes place on the dolphins' terms. While there are responsible and thoughtful swim-with-the-dolphins operators, sadly, it is also true that in some locations, wild dolphins are harassed and repeatedly disturbed by swim boats which tend to drop swimmers in the water as close as possible to the animals.

There is concern that disruption to feeding, resting, nursing and other behaviour may have a long-term impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals and populations. Dolphins are also a protected species in Florida waters. The US Marine Mammal Protection Act prohibits the harassment ►



NOAA/WMRS

Dolphin SMART field researchers survey a map of the Sanctuary

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

If you travel to the Florida Keys, look for the Dolphin SMART logo, and please book your trip with one of these charters.

Launched in January of 2007, the programme currently recognizes three businesses as 'Dolphin SMART': Dolphin Safari Charters (www.safaricharters.com) Sunny Days Catamarans (www.sunnydayskeywest.com) and Key West Eco Tours (www.keywestkayak.com)

and feeding of dolphins, and swimming with these animals is discouraged.

Of even greater concern are Florida's captive dolphin attractions, most of which rely on animals captured from the wild. Capture is a violent process, and many dolphins die while being transported long distances between facilities. In nature, dolphins are social animals that live in tight-knit family groups and can swim tens of kilometres a day. Being held in confined spaces is

cruel and stressful, leading to aggression and injury for both humans and dolphins.

So, as far as we're concerned, there's only one choice for the dolphin watcher in Florida and that's a responsible trip to see wild dolphins that takes care not to harm the animals. Being Dolphin SMART makes a difference. This was brought home to Gary by a family who, before they embarked on their Dolphin SMART accredited encounter, had been intending to visit a captive programme.

'My clients were so impressed that the dolphins were unafraid of the boat, combined with the Dolphin SMART information, that they decided that viewing dolphins in the wild was far better than swimming with them in captivity. They cancelled their swim with the captive dolphins when we

returned to the dock.' ♦



Courtney Vail is WDCS's US Policy Officer

Come whale watching with WDCS

"Awesome, stunning, incredible - it must be the most spectacular wildlife experience on Earth." Peter Harlow, OOTB holiday 2007



WDCS: HARLOW PHILLIPS (2), DUNCAN MURRELL (CENTRE)

WDCS's travel wing, **out of the blue**, offers responsible whale and dolphin watching holidays across the globe. From short breaks in the UK, to destinations further afield such as Alaska, Canada and the Azores. And when you travel with us,

you'll be helping to save these amazing animals as a share of the proceeds goes to WDCS.

Don't miss out. For more information just visit www.wdcs.org/outoftheblue or call 01249 449 533/547.



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