



## Giving the “Dolphin SMART” Seal of Approval in the Florida Keys

For many Florida Keys visitors, the idea of

swimming with wild dolphins may seem like the ultimate vacation experience. It may also disturb dolphins’ natural behavior, which is against the law, but that wasn’t stopping some charter boat operators from encouraging the practice.

To help reduce the potential impact on wild dolphins, Florida coastal resource managers developed a recognition program for charter businesses that meet criteria for promoting responsible viewing and preventing harassment of dolphins.

“I liken it to the ‘Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval’ or ‘dolphin safe tuna,’” explains Karrie Carnes, communications coordinator for the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. “It shows that these businesses are adhering to and exceeding best practices related to the Marine Mammal Protection Act.”

The Dolphin SMART program offers participating commercial tour operators recognition, education and training, and other incentives.

The program requires participants to educate their clientele and to minimize dolphin harassment, which may result from swimming with, feeding, or touching dolphins. These activities can disturb natural dolphin behaviors, such as migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, and sheltering.

Other program criteria include advertising guidelines, evaluation for initial participation, and annual renewal evaluations.

“The idea is to give operators the incentive to do the right thing by

*“I liken it to the ‘Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.’”*

*Karrie Carnes, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary*

providing them with the tools to be stewards of the environment and to aid us in dolphin conservation,” says Laura Engleby, marine mammal branch chief for the Southeast Regional Office of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service.

Engleby notes that Dolphin SMART also encourages regional scientists to research tourism’s impact on wild dolphins and shares dolphin research with participating tour operators.

“We joined the Dolphin SMART program to ensure that our boat is properly viewing the local Key West dolphins and to learn as much as we can through the research that has been done,” notes Lisa Sue Reedy, the certified Dolphin SMART captain of the *Dolphin Cat*.

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, NOAA Fisheries Service, Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, Dolphin Ecology Project, and local businesses developed the Dolphin SMART program after tour operators approached the sanctuary advisory council with concerns that an increasing number of charter boats could potentially harass dolphins because the animals’ habitat within the sanctuary was so small.

“At the time,” explains Engleby, “we had approximately 40 tour operators taking people out to see

or swim with dolphins in a small area that we call the dolphin triangle, potentially causing unnecessary stress to the local population by disturbing their natural behaviors.”

The federal and nonprofit conservation agencies worked with charter operators for three years to develop the Dolphin SMART program.

Dolphin SMART tour operators receive vessel flags, decals, and permission to use the program’s logo in their advertising. A program website hosted by the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries also helps promote participating businesses, and program materials are distributed through the chamber of commerce, concierges and booking agents, hotels, and other tourist locales.

Since the program was launched in 2007, three of the thirteen charter boat operators now working in Key West have been certified as Dolphin SMART, and the program has been expanded to coastal Alabama.

“We’ve heightened the awareness of all tour operators in Key West, whether they are involved in the program or not,”

notes Megan Harber, Dolphin SMART coordinator for the Florida Keys sanctuary.

“I see this type of program as the future of managing resources in a manner that is compatible with continued recreation,” says Dave Score, sanctuary superintendent. “This provides the incentive for people to do it right, and allows market-driven solutions to work.”

Score adds, “This will never replace strong regulations underpinned by good science and enforcement, but it is definitely a strategy worth using.” ❖

For more information on Dolphin SMART, go to [www.dolphinSMART.org](http://www.dolphinSMART.org). You may also contact Laura Engleby at (727) 551-5791, or [Laura.Engleby@noaa.gov](mailto:Laura.Engleby@noaa.gov), Karrie Carnes at (305) 809-4700, or [Karrie.Carnes@noaa.gov](mailto:Karrie.Carnes@noaa.gov), or Megan Harber at [Megan.Harber@noaa.gov](mailto:Megan.Harber@noaa.gov).

**How to be Dolphin SMART**

- S**tay at least 50 yards from dolphins
- M**ove away cautiously if dolphins show signs of disturbance
- A**lways put your engine in neutral when dolphins are near
- R**efrain from swimming with, touching, or feeding wild dolphins
- T**each others to be Dolphin SMART

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