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NATIONAL
OCEANIC AND
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ADMINISTRATION

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**WILDLIFE AGENCY REMINDS PUBLIC OF THE DANGERS OF
FEEDING AND HARASSING WILD DOLPHINS**

Labor Day weekend is historically one of the busiest tourist weekends of the summer season, and it is important that people visiting local beaches or boating on local waterways remember to be extremely cautious around wild dolphins. NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service reminds people that it is against federal law to feed or harass wild dolphins because it is harmful to the dolphins and dangerous to people.

Dolphin feeding activity remains a concern. The feeding activity includes one particular dolphin known as "Dolphin 56" who has been interacting with local boaters, begging for food, and being fed by people. Agency officials are concerned that the average citizen is unaware that offering a dolphin a handout is dangerous to both dolphins and humans and illegal under the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act.

"We understand that people find it tempting to feed and to interact with wild dolphins, and Dolphin 56 in particular. However, people need to realize that feeding wild dolphins is harmful and is illegal under federal law," said Trevor Spradlin, a marine mammal biologist in the NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources. "One of the best ways that people can help protect the health and welfare of Dolphin 56, and other wild dolphins, is to observe the animals at a respectful distance of at least 50 yards and to resist feeding them. In addition, people should avoid any activities that risk harassing dolphins, such as chasing, touching or swimming with the animals."

Dolphin 56 is originally from the Indian and Banana Rivers on the east coast of Florida. He is so named because of the numbers "56" that were marked on his dorsal fin by biologists in 1979 during a population study on wild dolphins in Florida. For years, he was documented in his resident rivers until, starting in 1996, researchers and private citizens started observing Dolphin 56 in coastal state waters as far north as New York. His long distance movements surprised dolphin researchers, as most

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coastal dolphins have much smaller home ranges. Recently, Dolphin 56 has been begging for fish from boaters in the coastal waters of North and South Carolina.

“It seems Dolphin 56 learned to take food from boaters and fishermen while in Florida,” said Spradlin. “As a result, his natural behavior has been altered, and he is no longer afraid of people or approaching them for handouts. Although he has learned to take handouts from people, scientists have observed him catching live fish just like a normal wild dolphin, even with a crooked jaw from an old injury. Dolphin 56 can successfully hunt for food naturally on his own.”

“We have received reports of people feeding dolphins spoiled and unsanitary bait fish or rotten fish from traps, which is very dangerous to the dolphins,” said Spradlin. “We have also received reports that people have fed dolphins beer, hot dogs, sandwiches and candy bars. These items are absolutely inappropriate and harmful to the health and well-being of the dolphins.”

For several years, NOAA Fisheries biologists have worked to educate the public that offering a dolphin a handout is harmful to the dolphins, dangerous to people, and illegal under Marine Mammal Protection Act. The Agency has developed educational materials, including brochures, posters, warning signs and public service announcements. Federal warning signs have been posted in marinas and coastal waterways and public service announcements have been aired to help educate visiting tourists and local boaters.

An in-depth review conducted by NOAA Fisheries biologists, outside marine mammal experts, and the Marine Mammal Commission, determined that feeding marine mammals in the wild alters their natural behavior in ways that place them at increased risk of injury and death. Repeated exposure to humans and human activities has been correlated with placing these animals at greater risk of incidental interactions with vessels and fishing activities, vandalism, and ingestion of inappropriate and contaminated food items. In addition, feeding may impact their ability or willingness to forage for food, which is of particular concern for young animals who need to learn foraging skills.

NOAA Fisheries is also concerned that commercial “swim-with-dolphin” programs in the wild risk harassing the animals, as such programs seek out and interact with dolphins in a manner that has the potential to disturb the animals’ behavioral patterns. Swim-with-dolphin activities in the Southeast United States are of particular concern because they are sometimes facilitated by, or capitalize on, illegal dolphin feeding.

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An additional concern about interactions with wild dolphins is that individual animals may become labeled as “nuisance animals.” In the Southeast, this concern is growing as dolphins are being turned into aggressive panhandlers, like Dolphin 56. NOAA Fisheries and local law enforcement officials have received numerous reports of people being injured by dolphins begging for food. The most recent documented case involved a 14-year-old girl who was bitten by a wild dolphin near Nokomis, Fla., after she tried to pet the animal. Also, increasing numbers of recreational and commercial fishermen have complained that dolphins have learned to take fish off their lines. The fishermen are unable to catch the fish they want and the dolphins run the risk of ingesting baited hooks. Scientists have documented cases where dolphins were found dead with hooks and fishing line in their throats or stomachs.

“Dolphins have a reputation for being friendly to humans, but the reality is they are powerful, wild animals that can be very aggressive,” said Spradlin. “ People need to respect these animals in their natural habitat and let them stay wild.”

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CONTACT SHEET

To report violations of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, please contact the National Marine Fisheries Service Enforcement Hotline 1-800-853-1964.

To report sightings of “Dolphin 56,” please call one of the following individuals:

Anywhere: Dr. Dan Odell, Research Biologist, Hubbs-Sea World Research Institute
Tel: 407/363-2662; E-mail: odell@pegasus.cc.ucf.edu

Maryland: Dave Schofield, National Aquarium in Baltimore
Tel: 410/576-1098; E-mail: dschofield@aqua.org

Virginia: Virginia Marine Science Museum Stranding Center
Tel: 757/437-6159; E-mail: vmsmstranding@erols.com

North Carolina: Keith Rittmaster, North Carolina Maritime Museum
Tel: 252/728-7317; E-mail: kritt@coastalnet.com
Dr. Laela Sayigh, University of North Carolina at Wilmington
Tel: 910/962-3473; E-mail: sayighl@uncwil.edu
Alessandro Bocconcelli, University of North Carolina at Wilmington
Tel: 910/256-3721; E-mail: bocconcellia@uncwil.edu

South Carolina: Wayne McFee, NOAA Charleston Laboratory
Tel: 843/762-8592; E-mail: Wayne.McFee@noaa.gov

For “Protect Dolphins” brochures and posters, marine mammal viewing guidelines, MMPA regulations and policy:

NMFS Office of Protected Resources: Trevor Spradlin
Tel: 301/713-2289 x103; E-mail: Trevor.Spradlin@noaa.gov

NMFS Southeast Regional Office: Diane Borggaard
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