

NOAA Fisheries Service's Visual Health Assessments of the Resident Community of Bottlenose Dolphins in the Perdido Bay Complex Near Orange Beach, AL

Updated on July 26, 2010

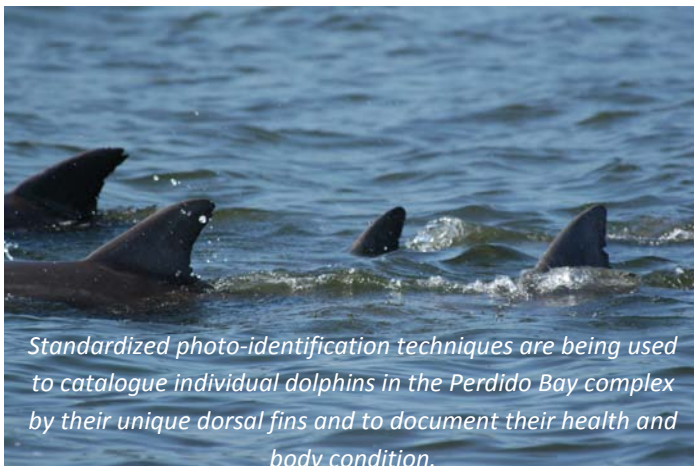
NOAA Fisheries Service's marine mammal biologists and partners are conducting visual health assessments of the resident community of bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) inhabiting the Perdido Bay complex (Wolf, Perdido, Bay La Launch, and Arnica Bays) near Orange Beach, AL. The purpose of the health assessments is to investigate whether the dolphins are exhibiting any effects from the Deepwater Horizon BP oil spill. These long-term resident dolphins have been the focus of a dedicated eco-tourism industry for almost twenty years and several local dolphin tour captains and citizens have expressed concern about the animals' health and welfare during the oil spill crisis and into the future.



Young dolphins socializing and behaving normally in the Perdido Bay Complex, Orange Beach, AL.

The visual health assessment effort requires nearshore boat-based surveys, so NOAA Fisheries Service has been coordinating with the Unified Command's Vessel of Opportunity Program to work with one of the local dolphin tour vessels registered with the program and assigned to the Wildlife Branch. Sighting information and behavioral observations of the dolphins are recorded on data sheets, and photographs and video are taken to document behavior and body condition, as well as to identify individual animals using photos of the animals' dorsal fins.

The visual assessment team conducted surveys in June and July, followed by community outreach efforts to inform residents about the health status of the animals and to explain NOAA Fisheries



Standardized photo-identification techniques are being used to catalogue individual dolphins in the Perdido Bay complex by their unique dorsal fins and to document their health and body condition.

and Unified Command's protocols for responding to animals in distress. Several groups of dolphins in the Perdido Bay complex, including calves recently born, have been observed and documented in good body condition and exhibiting normal socializing and feeding behaviors with no visible signs of illness detected. These surveys have been essential to accurately assess the animals' health status and determine if further action is warranted. During the July surveys, NOAA's marine mammal biologists were accompanied by an independent marine

mammal veterinarian with extensive expertise in dolphin health who verified the dolphins currently exhibit good body condition and show no immediate or visible signs of illness.

Follow-up monitoring and behavioral observations during future visual health assessments will continue to provide the scientific evidence needed to determine if and when interventions or rescues are warranted. To date, two dolphins have stranded in the Perdido Bay complex since the oil spill began, and neither stranding showed visible signs of oiling. Systematic analytical tests are being conducted on tissue samples from those animals to help determine cause of death. One of the two stranded dolphins was an old male with a history of high-risk interactions with humans (*e.g.*, closely approaching vessels; begging; and being fed by people, which is both harmful and illegal). Therefore, its age and risky behavior may have contributed to its death, but it is still too soon to make any conclusions about this case or any other stranded dolphins during the spill time period.

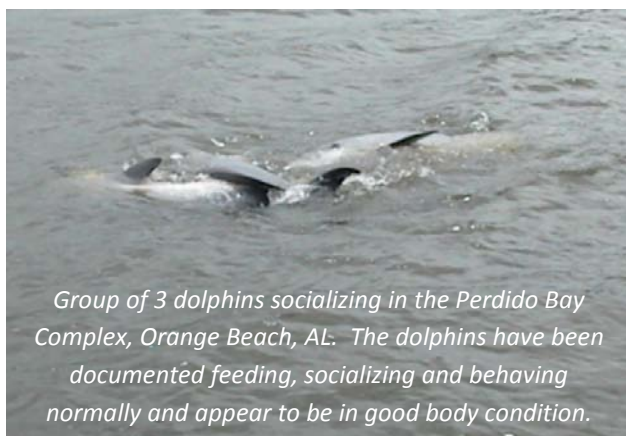


Dolphins swimming along side oil booms deployed in the Perdido Bay Complex, Orange Beach, AL.

Nevertheless, the continued good health of the resident dolphins in the Perdido Bay Complex are a hopeful sign that efforts to protect the fragile inshore ecosystem of the Gulf coast region are currently working.

For more information about dolphins and other protected species of concern during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill event, please visit:

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/oilspill.htm>



Group of 3 dolphins socializing in the Perdido Bay Complex, Orange Beach, AL. The dolphins have been documented feeding, socializing and behaving normally and appear to be in good body condition.



The good body condition of the resident dolphins in the Perdido Bay complex are a hopeful sign that efforts to protect inshore areas are working.



**Protected Resources Division
Southeast Regional Office**

**Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program
Office of Protected Resources**

NOAA/National Marine Fisheries Service