



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

Contact: Stacey Carlson
(727) 551

SER060623
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 23, 2006

NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE ASKS PUBLIC TO PROTECT WILD DOLPHINS [*New Billboard in Nokomis Promotes Wild Dolphin Conservation*](#)

Nokomis, Fla. – Recently, NOAA Fisheries Service posted an eye-catching billboard on Albee Road – a new outreach tactic for the agency to re-emphasize to locals and tourists that feeding wild bottlenose dolphins is illegal and sometimes lethal to the animal. The agency hopes the billboard will reach numerous coastal resource users and effectively spread their conservation messages to protect wild dolphins and encourage people to report violations.

The billboard, which features the message, “Don’t Feed Wild Dolphins – It’s Illegal and It Kills,” is part of NOAA Fisheries Service’s “Protect Dolphins” outreach campaign to boost public awareness about the dangers of interacting with wild dolphins.

“We hope the new billboard will remind people that feeding wild dolphins is illegal and can have serious consequences,” said David Bernhart, Assistant Regional Administrator for NOAA Fisheries Service Protected Resources Division in St. Petersburg.

Studies have shown that feeding wild dolphins places them at greater risk of injury from boats or ingestion of inappropriate food items, such as fishing hooks and contaminated food. Feeding wild dolphins can also affect their ability or willingness to forage for food on their own, making them more dependent on people for handouts and potentially passing those traits on to their calves and other dolphins in the area. Dolphins who learn to identify boats with food because they have been fed by boaters can interfere with recreational fishing activities, creating dangers for the dolphins and diminishing the fishing experience for the anglers.

Scientists working with Mote Marine Laboratory (MML) and the Chicago Zoological Society (CZS) have been studying the dolphin feeding problem in the Sarasota Bay area since 1990, and have demonstrated that increased public awareness can decrease the amount of feeding that occurs. In 2001, NOAA Fisheries Service, MML, and CZS conducted a public education campaign specifically regarding the illegal feeding of a local dolphin, named “Beggar.” While the campaign was initially successful in decreasing illegal feeding activities, the Albee Road billboard is an example of NOAA Fisheries’ renewed efforts to educate the public using innovative techniques that will deliver a continuous and consistent message.

“Unfortunately, all it takes to perpetuate the problem is for a few people to continue to feed Beggar and other dolphins in the area. Hopefully, the new billboard will get the message through more clearly to those who continue to feed these wild animals,” notes Dr. Randall Wells, Director of Mote Marine Laboratory’s Center for Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Research.

NOAA Fisheries Service officials emphasize that viewing wild marine mammals can be an educational and enriching experience if conducted safely and responsibly. The agency

encourages people to learn about wild dolphins and to participate in conservation efforts, such as observing the animals in their natural habitat from a distance of at least 50 yards.

Feeding and harassment of wild marine mammals are both illegal under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Harassment, as defined in the MMPA, means any act of pursuit, torment or annoyance that has the potential to injure or disturb a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild by causing disruption of behavioral patterns, including, but not limited to, migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, or sheltering. Violations of the MMPA can result in civil and criminal penalties with fines up to \$20,000 and one year in jail. NOAA Fisheries Service special agents and enforcement officers, partnered with state law enforcement officers, are increasing patrols and investigations to discourage any illegal feeding of wild dolphins in local waters, and will apprehend those violating the MMPA.

To report suspected MMPA violations, such as feeding wild dolphins or harassment, please contact the NOAA Fisheries Service Enforcement Hotline at 1-800-853-1964.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries Service, please visit: www.nmfs.noaa.gov.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners and nearly 60 countries to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes.

For more information about NOAA Fisheries' Protect Dolphins Campaign, visit: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/education/protectdolphins.htm>.

###