



NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC AND
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Protecting Wild Dolphins During the Gulf Oil Spill

NOAA has received calls from concerned citizens to help coastal populations of bottlenose dolphins. NOAA is working closely with its state and local partners to assess and respond to distressed dolphins or dolphins found in areas affected by oil from the Deepwater Horizon/BP spill event.

While this event presents an enormous challenge to many aquatic animals across the region, there are steps the public can do to help.

NOAA and its partners ask concerned citizens to follow these rules:

- Report any dead, stranded, or distressed dolphins or other marine mammals to the wildlife hotline at 866-557-1401.
- Do not push the animal back out to sea – this delays examination and treatment, and often results in the animal re-stranding itself in worse condition.
- Do not approach, feed, or swim with the animal.
- Stay with the animal until rescuers arrive, but use caution. Keep a safe distance from the head and tail.
- Minimize contact with the animal (use gloves if necessary) and avoid inhaling air the animal has breathed out.
- Keep crowds away and noise levels down to avoid causing further stress to the animal.
- Keep dogs and other pets away from live or dead marine mammals.
- Do not collect any parts from dead marine mammals. This is prohibited under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

“Any attempt to capture, move, lead, or scare groups of dolphins out of an area would do more harm than good,” said Laura Engleby, marine mammal biologist for NOAA’s Fisheries Service. “Moving or relocating dolphins could reduce the chance of survival and may place the animals at greater risk of injury or death.”

Corralling or containing wild dolphins in secluded bays and potentially hand feeding them until an area is cleaned is not practical, logistically feasible, safe, or legal. This type of confinement also places dolphins at greater risk during severe weather events. Additionally, hand feeding dolphins may cause long-term dependency on humans for food, causing dolphins to lose their natural hunting and survival skills – they may even continue this behavior after the spill event and after oil is gone.

Trained responders are dispatched to any report of a distressed dolphin to determine if a rescue or intervention is warranted and feasible. Captures of free-swimming dolphins are usually a last resort, and are attempted only if the safety and needs of the dolphin and rescue team can be ensured.

NOAA and partners are conducting aerial and boat-based surveys to document potential changes in dolphin populations. For example, one team is conducting dolphin photo-identification surveys in some of the coastal waters along Louisiana, Mississippi, and the Florida Panhandle.

While smaller animals such as birds and some sea turtles are easier to retrieve and transport to rehabilitation facilities, dolphins pose a more significant challenge due to their size, weight, strength, and agility in the water. NOAA and its state and local partners are assessing and responding to distressed dolphins by:

- Responding to all reports of distressed and stranded dolphins and whales, or dolphins reported in oiled areas;
- Conducting photo identification surveys, and;
- Conducting behavioral surveys.

“When the incident first occurred and we realized that the oil would likely reach bays and sounds of the northern Gulf, we quickly launched efforts to document the dolphins inhabiting these areas so we can better understand potential impacts on their populations”, said Lori Schwacke, marine mammal biologist for NOAA’s National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science.

Teams are also conducting marine mammal behavioral and visual health assessment surveys in high-risk areas that will monitor dolphins for potential signs of distress and provide rapid notification to the wildlife hotline when such animals are detected. Physical and behavioral signs of distress include weight loss, appearance of skin lesions, listing to one side, labored or difficult breathing, not moving when approached, separation of mothers and calves, and general unresponsiveness.

Natural behaviors are sometimes confused with distress behavior. Natural behaviors include resting, loud exhalations at the water surface (which sounds like a chuff) or feeding. For example, dolphins have many strategies to catch fish, such as “strand” or “mud” feeding where the dolphins herd fish into shallow areas to feed. This behavior can seem alarming to watch if people are not familiar with it since the dolphins often work in very shallow water and actually beach themselves as they chase fish onto shore.

Although severely limited in our ability to move dolphins out of their natural habitats in response to the oil spill, NOAA’s Fisheries Service and our partners are doing everything we can to help animals in distress and learn as much as we can about how dolphins respond to and might be affected by an oil spill.

NOAA’s mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth’s environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources. Visit us at <http://www.noaa.gov> or on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/usnoaagov>.