

FEDERAL CAMPAIGNS SUPPORT FLORIDA KEYS MARINE RESOURCE PROTECTION

Christina | Jan 29th, 2010

FLORIDA KEYS — Helping to set a world standard of marine conservation and ecological concern, Florida Keys tourism interests and Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary officials strive to balance resource protection with recreational and educational uses to protect fragile marine ecosystems.

Two campaigns — Dolphin SMART and Blue Star — support the sanctuary's goal of resource protection by engaging local tour operators as environmental stewards.

One area of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary is home to a group of wild bottlenose dolphins, and many tour operators conduct dolphin-watching excursions there.

Dolphin SMART aims to preserve the experience for both humans and dolphins. The program was developed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and National Marine Fisheries Service, along with the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society and the Dolphin Ecology Project.

SMART established five guidelines for observing dolphins: **S**tay at least 50 yards away, **M**ove cautiously if the dolphins display any signs of disturbance, **A**lways keep the boat in neutral when dolphins are near, **R**efrain from swimming with, feeding or touching the dolphins and **T**ell others about the SMART program.

Implementing the Dolphin SMART program helps tour operators who view wild dolphins stay in business by viewing dolphins responsibly, without disrupting their natural behavior. That helps dolphin pods remain healthy.

For more information about the Dolphin SMART program, visit <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/dolphinSMART/participants.html>.

Water enthusiasts planning a dive or snorkel trip within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary now can use a Blue Star-recognized charter, ensuring the operator is dedicated to coral reef education and conservation.

Blue Star is a new, voluntary recognition program established by the sanctuary to help reduce the impact of divers and snorkelers on the coral reef system that parallels the Florida Keys — the only living coral barrier reef in the continental United States.

Dive operators who participate in the program must be involved in conservation-related activities and events. Their staff must meet certain training criteria, promote responsible tourism and teach divers and snorkelers in-water etiquette. That includes practicing good buoyancy, taking care in placement of hands and fins and avoiding touching or standing on coral.

Operators are evaluated yearly, and Blue Star-rated operators display a decal with the Blue Star logo and current calendar year on their charter vessel.

For Blue Star details, visit <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/bluestar/operators.html>.

For more information about water activities in the Florida Keys & Key West, as well as accommodations and other information, visit [www.fla-keys](http://www.fla-keys.com).

<http://www.newmanpr.com/2010/01/29/federal-campaigns-support-florida-keys-marine-resource-protection/>