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Dolphin program gains momentum

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But participation by Keys operators has been mediocre

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Tourists spend big bucks each year to observe dolphins in the wild, and there is no question that encounters with the intelligent marine mammals produce thrilling memories. However, federal marine sanctuary officials don't want human fascination with the animals to disrupt their natural activities.

Marine mammal experts say swimming with or feeding wild dolphins disrupts their hunting and mating patterns, and can permanently alter their behavior.

In 2007, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and dolphin conservation groups launched a program, Dolphin SMART, to reward operators of Keys dolphin-watching boats for following responsible wild dolphin viewing guidelines established by the federal government.

The program has resulted in only four operators in the Keys -- with a fifth on the way -- becoming Dolphin SMART, despite the initial complaints by boat operators about unscrupulous captains allowing patrons to swim with or harass dolphins. The complaints came in the early 2000s, when more dolphin-watch operators were coming to the Keys, a trend that has since died off.

"I think it was a great way to learn about dolphin behavior and it is something I can pass along to my customers," said Capt. Alex Aller, who runs the tour company Islescapes.

Despite the mediocre response in the Keys, the program is growing throughout the state and country and has become the federal model for responsible observation of dolphins. Dolphin SMART was expanded to Orange Beach, Ala., in 2008, and launched in southwest Florida earlier this year.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced Wednesday that three dolphin boat operators in St. Petersburg and two operators in Fort Myers earned Dolphin SMART certifications.

"Dolphin SMART tour operators are committed to conserving the health of local dolphin populations," said Jessica Powell, NOAA Fisheries Dolphin SMART regional coordinator. "Visitors who book with a Dolphin SMART operator can feel confident that they are participating in responsible tourism."

In addition, 21 dolphin-watch operators have expressed interest in the program in Clearwater and St. Petersburg, 11 have done so in Fort Myers and eight in the Sarasota/Bradenton area, Powell said.

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, National Marine Fisheries Service, Dolphin Ecology Project and Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society developed the Dolphin SMART program

after four operators approached the Sanctuary Advisory Council in 2004 with concerns that an increasing number of charter boats potentially were harassing dolphins.

The acronym "SMART" in Dolphin SMART is a reminder of the basic principles of dolphin watching: Stay at least 50 yards from dolphins, move away slowly if the dolphins seem disturbed, always put your vessel engine in neutral when dolphins are near, refrain from feeding, touching or swimming with wild dolphins, and teach others to be Dolphin SMART.

"People recognize the value of green tourism," sanctuary spokeswoman Karrie Carnes said of the trend among divers and outdoors enthusiasts to participate in volunteerism or eco-friendly programs while on vacation. "Tourists will go with more conservation-minded tours and pay more money for it."

NOAA encourages visitors to southwest Florida, the Florida Keys and Alabama to book with a Dolphin SMART operator. Vessels of participating operators carry a Dolphin SMART flag and decal with the current calendar year. A list of Dolphin SMART operators also is available online at <http://www.dolphinSMART.org>.

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