

How to Be Dolphin Smart, KITV September 7, 2011

Whale watching tours, snorkeling, spotting dolphins, Hawaii's tourism industry is based heavily on getting up close with wildlife to see what they normally do out there and people don't normally get a chance to see it. But now NOAA has issued a challenge to all of us to turn our interest into action and joining us to talk about a new program is Laura McCue with NOAA she's on the end there and Courtney Vail from the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society. Good morning ladies and thank you so much for joining us.

Laura why don't I start off with you. You know a lot of people love dolphins, I myself have been swimming on the west side, you know jumping in the water and it is truly an amazing experience to see dolphins swimming all around you, Kealahou Bay people can jump into a canoe and see the spinner dolphins out there and for me personally it was a wonderful experience but you actually say there is a problem with swimming with dolphins. Why is that?

There is, spinner dolphins are unique to most cetaceans, their actually resting during the day so when we have these close interactions including swimming with dolphins, this can actually negatively affect the dolphin behaviors and under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance that can disrupt the dolphins natural behaviors is actually illegal.

So even if you are swimming in the water and you are not actually going toward the dolphins and you are just watching them that's actually interrupting their behaviors.

It can. What the Dolphin SMART program is actually trying to do is address those issues that are targeting those animals.

And Courtney you've got a special program that you are working on to help businesses, these dolphin tours actually have a special designation. What does that mean?

Right. So the Dolphin SMART program is a partnership and it was developed in concert with the public and with government agencies, with business owners, with tour operators, and it's been a long time in the making so it's a very collaborative effort to address these behaviors in the wild while enriching the viewing experience so the goal specifically really is to prevent and eliminate the potential for harassment while promoting businesses that do the right thing and the program really does allow the public to be engaged with the stewardship and protection of dolphins as well and that is the unique aspect that we all can be a part of the solution rather than the problem and then reward those businesses that go that extra mile and take that extra effort to responsibly view, to educate their consumers and customers that come on the boats and to advertise responsibly, to not perpetuate the messages that encourage that detrimental interaction in the wild.

I know you brought a flag in here that shows if a business will be designated as Dolphin SMART. We'll take a look at this and you said about advertising because a lot of those dolphin businesses advertise you know you're close encounter with the wild dolphin and you know experience with the wild dolphins, so how do you get people to change their attitudes about the animals in the wild.

Well we are seeking the help of the operators to change those attitudes because the messages that are portrayed in advertising does encourage and perpetuate those activities. So we are hoping the program becomes the competitive advantage for the operator that is doing the right thing so that when a consumer, the public is looking to book a travel tour with a viewing operator that they will look for the Dolphin SMART flag. If an operator is involved with the program they will fly their flag on their vessel and they will have other collateral that we have developed to help get the message out and the public can then look before they book and help promote dolphin conservation at the same time.

Well Courtney and Laura thank you so much for joining us we really appreciate it- important message that both of you have. And don't forget if you would like to watch this interview again you can go over to our website at KITV.com, also we should let you know there is a Dolphin SMART program training that begins tonight at 6:00 at the Waipahu High School Cafeteria. It is 6:15(AM), we'll be right back.