

NOAA brings Dolphin SMART session to Gulf Coast nature tourism crowd

by Ray Dougherty special to GulfCoastNewsToday.com | Posted: Tuesday, July 23, 2013 2:15 pm

ORANGE BEACH, Ala. – Dozens of area nature tour operators were on hand for a Tuesday morning presentation from NOAA on best practices for responsible wild dolphin viewing.

The 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) has made harassment or feeding of wild dolphins a federal violation for more than 40 years. Recent rapid expansion in the eco-tourism sector has brought with it the addition of many more commercial wildlife tour operations along the Gulf Coast.

At the same time, Alabama has seen a dramatic swell in dolphin deaths.

The session was presented at the Orange Beach Marine Police facility in coordination with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Marine Resources division.

Spearheading the presentation was marine biologist Jessica Powell from the NOAA southern region headquarters in St. Petersburg, Florida. She emphasized tour operators' avoidance of "chronic disturbances" of wild dolphin populations. This disturbance stress can compromise marine mammals' health, reduce reproductive success or cause the animals' displacement from the habitat altogether. Species stress can also lead to injury or death from boat strikes and interaction with fishing gear.

The rule of thumb, for commercial tours and private boaters alike, is to always stay at least 50 yards from wild dolphins.

Powell detailed signs of dolphin disturbance. These include abrupt changes in direction of travel or speed, tail slapping and side splashing, and females attempting to shield a calf with her body. Maneuvering a vessel into or through a group of dolphins is a strict 'Do NOT', as is encircling dolphins or attempting to entrap them between vessels.

the MMPA makes it outright illegal to attempt feeding wild dolphins, as well as pursuing, touching or swimming with them. Also on hand for the session was Special Agent Liz Nelson of NOAA's enforcement division. She emphasized the minimum fine for attempting to feed wild dolphins: \$5,000.

Special Agent Nelson told the gathering of two such recent fines handed out in Panama City (FL), including the same vessel being cited for *two* separate feeding infractions at that fine amount. Nelson also said that fine is enforceable in that same amount for BOTH the vessel's owner and its operator.

Nelson reinforced the No-Feeding theme, confirming that doing so permanently conditions dolphins

to approach boaters. That alteration in the natural behavior has led to unwelcome approaches which have resulted in fatal shootings of dolphins. Nelson detailed another such incident from right here in Orange Beach where a dolphin was stabbed in the head with a screwdriver. That injury resulted in the animal's death.

Dauphin Island Sea Lab's senior marine scientist, Dr. Ruth Carmichael, also spoke at the event. She outlined the Lab's relatively young 'Manatee Sighting Network', which has identified and recorded more than 200 sightings of the gentle sea cows in Alabama coastal waters. Carmichael said, "We're encouraged, by these numbers, that our Alabama manatee population is growing."

She also pleaded with the NOAA officials, and all attendees, to seek funding to research wild dolphin populations of Alabama's coastal waters. Carmichael said without such a baseline starting point, we can never gauge the area's true dolphin habitat. DISL has recorded 1,025 nearshore dolphin deaths in local waters between February, 2010 and last week, mid-July 2013.

Since this rapid rise in dolphin mortality began months before the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf, the phenomenon may not be entirely blamed on the oil, according to Dr. Carmichael. A colder than normal winter at the outset of the dolphin die-off may have contributed to some kind of chill-shock. The oil spill perhaps exacerbated the dolphin mortality of recent years. The exact cause, as well as how long the lifespan downturn could persist, remain a mystery.

More information can be found at DolphinSMART.org or DontFeedWildDolphins.org

NOAA's Dolphin SMART program stands for :

Stay at least 50 yards from dolphins

Move away cautiously if dolphins show signs of disturbance

Always put your engine in neutral when dolphins are near

Refrain from feed, touching or swimming with wild dolphins

Teach others to be Dolphin SMART

Dolphin Facts:

Dolphins "travel" for 58% of every day, with another 20% of each day spent foraging for food

Dolphins only "rest" about 3% of every day, when it is believed that half of their brains sleep while the other half keeps them awake enough to remain afloat and keep from drowning

Female dolphins can live past 50 years. They typically give birth every 3 to 6 years, carrying their young a full 12 months and nursing their calves up to an additional 20 months

our coastal dolphins generally do not hold their breath for longer than 5 minutes

everyone know about dolphins' athletic "leaping" abilities, with the power generated by their tail fluke.

Though they can swim at speed in excess of 20 mph, our coastal dolphins usually swim at under 5

mph.
