



PRESS-REGISTER

Alabama gets Dolphin SMART

Program intended to teach sustainable viewing of dolphins

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Staff Reporter

In the early 1990s, there were three or four boats offering dolphin-watching trips on Perdido Bay. Today, tourism officials say, there are nearly 30 vessels in that business.

And with increased regulation being put on the charter fishing industry, to say nothing of escalating operating costs, it would not be surprising if more captains don't forgo trips to the deep sea for inshore sightseeing excursions in the coming years, said Joanne McDonough, a nature tourism specialist with the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Much in the manner that tourism officials and biologists teamed up along Alabama's coast to educate beachgoers about the need to share the shore with nesting sea turtles, they are now working in concert to promote the proper way to watch dolphins.

As such, Alabama has become the second state to offer Dolphin SMART certification to tour operators.

A federal program piloted in 2007 in the Florida Keys to promote safe and sustainable dolphin watching, Dolphin SMART was first introduced in Alabama last fall at the request of local tour operators, said Kelly Brinkman.

Brinkman is a natural resources planner for the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

She heads the voluntary program.

So far, a single boat captain — Bill Mitchell of Orange Beach's Cetacean Cruises — has earned Dolphin SMART status, though others are working toward the distinction, Brinkman said.

To earn the status, captains must:

Complete a four-hour training session — the next one is scheduled for late spring.

Be evaluated during a tour by Brinkman.

Submit all of their advertising for review.

The advertising review is important in order to ensure captains aren't promising their customers more than they can legally deliver, said McDonough, who is a former boat tour operator.

"Don't tell people they're going to swim with dolphins," McDonough said. "No. 1, it's illegal and No. 2, it's false advertising."

The bottlenose dolphins abundant in south Baldwin County's bays and bayous, though not endangered, are protected under the federal Marine Mammals Protection Act along with whales, walruses, sea lions and seals. That law makes it illegal to feed or otherwise disturb dolphins.

Dolphin SMART, McDonough said, "Is a good way to get a message across: There's such a thing as loving a resource to death." Some of the basics of being Dolphin SMART, which program officials hope captains will spread to the general boating public, include putting your boat in neutral when dolphins are around, staying at least

50 yards away from the mammals and never feeding or trying to swim with them. Captains are also taught how to spot an irritation in dolphins.

McDonough said that the Dolphin SMART status could provide a competitive advantage in the crowded field when it comes to luring ecologically minded customers — of which Convention and Visitors Bureau data show there are more every year in coastal Alabama.

In 2002, for example, about 8 percent of vacationers to Baldwin County's beaches said they participated in some sort of wildlife viewing while in town. That, the Convention and Visitors Bureau estimated, resulted in about \$37 million in spending. Four years later, the number of visitors who told the Convention and Visitors Bureau that they took time to watch wildlife rose to 19 percent, an increase that resulted in some \$100 million in spending, McDonough said.

"We have tremendous opportunities to promote our natural resources, which not only benefits the environment but also the economy," McDonough said. "There aren't many places in the world where you can see this diversity of wildlife."

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