PACIFIC WHALE FOUNDATION NEWEST DOLPHIN SMART OPERATOR

20 FEBRUARY 2015 - 8:18PM

WDC and program partners have continued expansion of the Dolphin SMART conservation program in Hawaii on the island of Maui. Dolphin SMART is a voluntary outreach and stewardship program that awards annual recognition to tour operators who responsibly view wild dolphins and educate their patrons on dolphin conservation. Dolphin SMART is a partnership program developed by Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC) with NOAA 's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and National Marine Fisheries Service, and the Dolphin Ecology Project.

Pacific Whale Foundation crew with their 2015 Dolphin SMART flag upon initial recognition

Pacific Whale Foundation is the most recent operator to earn Dolphin SMART recognition in Hawaii, and as the sixth Dolphin SMART business in the state, marks the Program's continued expansion on Maui. Pacific Whale Foundation joins Trilogy Excursions on Maui; Hawaii Nautical and their subsidiary Port Waikiki Cruises, Ocean Joy Cruises, and Dolphin Star on Oahu; and Holoholo Charters on Kauai. With the addition of Pacific Whale Foundation, there are currently 17 participating operators in Florida and Hawaii.

Launched in 2007, the program originated in Key West, FL, and expanded to Alabama before launching in Hawaii in 2011.

The Dolphin SMART acronym is a reminder of the basic principles of responsible dolphin viewing:

• Stay at least 50 yards from dolphins,
• Move away slowly if the dolphins show signs of disturbance,
• Always put your vessel engine in neutral when dolphins are near,
• Refrain from feeding, touching, or swimming with wild dolphins,
• Teach others to be Dolphin SMART.

Viewing dolphins from a responsible distance is a cornerstone of the Dolphin SMART program. Close viewing of wild dolphins may disrupt important natural behaviors such as resting, feeding, and nursing, and result in negative impacts to the health of dolphin groups and their young.

We are pleased to have Pacific Whale Foundation as a part of Dolphin SMART, joining a community of other Dolphin SMART tour operators who are committed to conserving the health of local dolphin populations. We encourage visitors and locals to book with a Dolphin SMART business because they can feel confident that they are participating in responsible tourism. A list of Dolphin SMART businesses is available online. Current Dolphin SMART operators carry a Dolphin SMART flag, and a decal with the current calendar year showing.

Local Hawaiian businesses and organizations are also showing their solidarity for wild dolphin conservation by becoming Proud Supporters of Dolphin SMART. They then help raise public awareness about the program and educate the public on why it is important to responsibly view wild dolphins. Current organizations that are Proud Supporters of Dolphin SMART in Hawaii include hotels, foundations, organizations, and businesses found throughout the islands.

In recent years, there has been an increase in human dolphin interactions in the main Hawaiian Islands. These activities primarily target Hawaiian spinner dolphins (Stenella longirostris longirostris), which are routinely found close to shore in shallow coves and bays where they congregate during the day to rest, care for their young and avoid predators before traveling to deeper water at night to hunt for food. Commercial operators that offer "swim with wild dolphin" tours and individuals that swim or paddle from shore interact with dolphins during times when the animals are at rest. Hawaiian spinner dolphins are a subspecies found only in the Hawaiian Islands and are genetically distinct from other spinner populations, such as those in the Eastern Tropical Pacific.

WDC is concerned that these human activities displace spinner dolphins from their resting areas and may have population and individual-level effects, and supports a variety of measures to protect spinner dolphins throughout the Hawaiian Islands. Scientific studies have documented human disturbance of Hawaiian spinner dolphins during their resting periods along the west coast of the Big Island of Hawaii, most notably in and around Kealakekua Bay. Recent research supports our concerns regarding disturbance and potential displacement of localized spinner dolphin populations within Hawaii through increasing human interactions.

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