

PRESS-REGISTER

Dolphin SMART workshop set

Monday, April 13, 2009

Submitted by Kim Shumack

The first Dolphin SMART training workshop of 2009 is scheduled for 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. April 21 at the Orange Beach Welcome Center.

The program is designed to encourage responsible viewing of wild dolphins along the Alabama Gulf Coast.

Tour operators, especially captains and owners, are asked to attend as this session is the first step to becoming recognized as a Dolphin SMART business.

"Our Gulf Coast is a premiere destination for viewing wild bottlenose dolphin in their natural habitat," said Joanne McDonough of the Nature Tourism Initiative. "However, if we approach wild dolphins too closely, move too quickly or make too much noise, we increase the risk of disrupting their natural behaviors. This program provides tour operators with detailed knowledge about the laws, responsible viewing practices and the local dolphin research."

Developed by NOAA's National Marine Sanctuary and National Marine Fisheries Service, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society and the Dolphin Ecology Project, the Dolphin SMART began in the Florida Keys as a voluntary participation program for businesses that seeks to educate people about responsible viewing of wild dolphin.

The program is made possible in Alabama through the support of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Coastal Section, the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium.

The acronym SMART is a reminder of the basic principles of dolphin viewing etiquette: stay at least

50 yards from dolphins; move away slowly if the dolphins show signs of disturbance; always put the vessel engine in neutral when dolphins are near; refrain from feeding, touching or swimming with wild dolphins; teach others to be Dolphin SMART.

"By choosing to follow these principles, tour operators demonstrate their care and concern for dolphin conservation and set good examples of viewing wildlife in the eyes of the public," McDonough said.

In November 2008, L.A. Watersports, which operates out of Orange Beach, was the first business in Alabama recognized as Dolphin SMART.

Once a business meets all the requirements for recognition, the Dolphin SMART business will receive a program flag and decals to display on the vessel as well as the use of the official logo in their advertising. Each year, the charter will be evaluated to ensure it is continuing to meet standards.

Participation is free, but registration is required by Thursday. To register, call program coordinator Kelly Brinkman at 251-621-1216, ext. 232.

For more information on the Dolphin SMART program, visit www.sanctuaries.noaa.gov/dolphinSMART.

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