Destin Dolphin SMART Project Proposal

Attachments List:

References

Project location map (Destin East Pass region)

Detailed Budget

Marine Wildlife Response Group Biographic Sketches

Conflict of Interest Disclosure Statement

Local Dolphin Sightseeing and Ecotour Businesses

Letters of Support for Project
- Destin Ecotourism Operators and Business Partners
- Dr. Randy Wells, Chicago Zoological Society
- Courtney Vail, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, Dolphin SMART Program

Destin Dolphin SMART Program Flyer

References:

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Destin Dolphin SMART Project Location Map:

Destin East Pass region and surrounding area of inshore Choctawhatchee Bay, FL.

Budget Details (Estimated):

Item	Year one	Year two	Year Three	Total	Pay basis: hr/yr	Pay rate
Salaries						
Program Coordinator/Administrator	7,000	7,000	7,000	21,000	384	18.23
Field Assistants/Observers (2 staff)	8,000	8,000	8,000	24,000	240	16.67
Human Dimensions Specialist	5,000	5,000	5,000	15,000	288	17.36
Secret Shopper (evaluator)	600	600	600	1,800	60	10.00
Total	20,600	20,600	20,600	61,800		
Outreach & Workshops						
Printed materials and designs	2,500	500	500	3,500		
Website development & Hosting	2,000	250	250	2,500		
Video production	3,000	300	300	3,600		
Meeting costs ($250 each x 2/yr)	500	500	500	1,500		
Incentives (decals, etc)	200	200	200	600		
Total	8,200	1,750	1,750	11,700		
Monitoring Project						
Boat fuel and rental ($400/mo @ 5 mo)	2,000	2,000	2,000	6,000		
Data collection (cameras, PCs)	1,000	400	400	1,800		
Vehicle costs ($80/mo for 5 mo)	400	400	400	1,200		
Miscellaneous	200	200	200	600		
Total	3,400	2,800	2,800	9,600		
Travel (attend meetings)	1,300	1,300	1,300	3,900		
Administrative costs (accounting)	1,000	1,000	1,000	3,000		
Grand total	**34,500**	**27,450**	**27,450**	**90,000**		

Current outside funding:				
Marine Wildlife Response contract with Chicago Zoological Society				
Salary support (2 staff)	19,644	19,644	0	39,288
Project materials/supplies	3,900	3,900	0	7,800
Travel	2,570	2,000	0	4,570
Total:				**51,658**
Program Partner contributed resources:				
Meeting supplies and venue	1,000	1,000	1,000	3,000
Boat access	600	600	600	1,800
Video production/website assistance	1,500	250	250	2,000
				6,800

About Marine Wildlife Response Group (MWR)

This small company was created in summer 2014 to act as a contracting service for administration of research grants on marine wildlife conservation and education. The business office is located in Mary Esther, FL and is owned by ShipAhoy Cottages, LLC. The company is licensed in Okaloosa County and owns waterfront condominium housing and a marine vessel. MWR has professional liability insurance and tax receipt registration with Florida Dept of Revenue, and is registered with SAM.gov.

Biographic sketches of Marine Wildlife Response Group team members:

Steve Shippee, PhD: Dr. Shippee began a career in marine mammal biology working as a behaviorist and diver at Florida's Gulfarium in 1975, and eventually became show director and assistant manager. During this employment, he participated in marine mammal stranding response in the Okaloosa to Escambia area, and was also was the first individual to hold a federal permit for sea turtle nesting surveys and nest relocation in the region. He completed his BS in marine biology at the University of West Florida in 1983 and then became a biological technician with the Navy Marine Mammal Program, in Hawaii from 1984-1993, and then in San Diego from 1993-2005. During his Navy employment, he was a technical representative to fleet personnel overseeing development and implementation of marine mammal mine-hunting systems, management of product improvement projects to develop a Shipboard Forward Deployment capability, and supporting numerous research projects on cetacean ecology, sensory systems, and physiology. He moved to the University of Central Florida in Orlando in 2004 to pursue a doctoral program in Conservation Biology, and completed his dissertation work on bottlenose dolphin habitat use, distribution, and stranding mortality focusing on the connected Choctawhatchee and Pensacola Bay estuaries. He conducted marine mammal stranding response during the Northern Gulf Unusual Mortality Event following the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, and participates on the NOAA investigative team conducting research on the impacts of the spill on marine mammals. Dr. Shippee has co-authored numerous scientific papers on marine mammal ecology and biology, and has given dozens of presentations to audiences in the northwest Florida region on these animals. He is manager/director of Marine Wildlife Response Group, a small company created in 2014 to conduct marine wildlife research and conservation projects. Steve is an avid kayaker, photographer, dog handler, and outdoorsman living in Mary Esther along beautiful Santa Rosa Sound.

Tara Kirby, MS, LMHC: Ms. Kirby earned her Bachelors of Science in Business Administration from Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and her Masters of Science in Clinical Counseling and Psychology from Troy University, Troy AL. She is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor in the State of Florida, and certified as a Qualified Supervisor for Registered Mental Health Counselor Interns. Ms. Kirby's experience includes managing a marketing segment for Alamo Rent-A-Car at the world headquarters in Fort Lauderdale, FL; medical office billing and administration; and teaching conversational English in Yokohama, Japan. Since 2004, she has worked in counseling both children and adults, from various social economic backgrounds and with a multitude of diagnoses. Ms. Kirby has provided individual, group, and crises counseling services in a range of settings including two county jails, a FEMA recovery center, child development centers, not for profit agencies, and has provided on-site service in schools, on military bases, in public housing projects, and at client's homes. She excels at direct contact as well as supervising others, gathering information and integrating data from multiple sources to find solutions, develop, coordinate, improve, implement, and expand services. Ms. Kirby has been a partner with Marine Wildlife Response Group since inception. Tara is the proud parent of a college student, a high school student, three dogs, an uromastyx lizard, and a turtle.

Christina Toms, MS, PhD Candidate: Ms. Toms is an experienced marine mammal observer who has been involved in marine mammal related research since 2001. She completed her BA in marine biology and psychology at the University of Hawaii, Hilo in 2004. After spending several years volunteering and working in the marine mammal field, she entered a marine mammal cognition program to earn a MS degree in experimental psychology from the University of Southern Mississippi in 2011. She worked with Dr. Shippee following the oil spill, which led to a PhD opportunity in the Physiological Ecology and Bioenergetics Lab at the University of Central Florida. Ms. Toms's dissertation is focused on bottlenose dolphin seasonal population dynamics, movement, and residency patterns in the northwest Florida region. She is also using genetic markers to better understand the discreteness of dolphin communities between inshore and coastal areas in the Florida Panhandle. Ms. Toms has worked regularly with NOAA and other collaborators on several dolphin photo-identification and biopsy projects on the Mississippi and Texas coasts since 2012 and has been a research partner with Marine Wildlife Response Group since November 2014. Christina currently lives in Pensacola and is based out of the University of West Florida as a guest researcher in the biology department.

Hannah Roth, BS: Ms. Roth received her BS in Biology from Valdosta State University in 2010 and participated in numerous research projects in marine fisheries during her education. She then worked as a fisheries biologist with the NOAA Marine Fisheries Lab in Panama City from 2011-13, and conducted sea turtle nesting surveys in Panama City during 2012-13. Ms. Roth has been involved in specimen and data collection to determine fish populations and aging studies; fisheries observation at sea to support bottom longline and reef fish surveys; and marine mammal stranding response to collect data on mortality and health of bottlenose dolphins following the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. Ms. Roth has been a research partner with Marine Wildlife Response Group since its inception and is responsible for database development, data acquisition, and marine mammal observations. Hannah currently lives in Navarre, FL, and is an avid scuba diver and angler.

Timothy Doran, BS: Mr. Doran attended avionics technical schools and air traffic control training during enlistment in the US Air Force. He served as an instructor for special forces escape and evasion training, and participating in aggressor exercises. He later received a BS in Biology and Dentistry from Alcance Latino-Americano College Leon, GTO, Mexico in 1992. His accomplishments include operating a school for English language outreach and providing dental care for less fortunate families in Mexico. After returning to the US in 1998, he worked as a Marine Hydrographer conducting hydrographic surveys in various part us the country using GPS systems, motion reference units, and acoustic sensors. In 2001, Mr. Doran began working as a Systems Engineer for the Boeing Company where he manages a system integration lab. He conducted underwater acoustic sound field surveys in Choctawhatchee Bay during 2013-14 in support of an Army Corps of Engineers navigational modeling survey, and later assisted members of the marine mammal stranding response team with rescue and examination of deceased animals during the post-Deepwater Horizon cetacean mortality investigation. Mr. Doran has volunteered as a carnivore shift zookeeper, outreach spokesman, and informal education assistant. He began working with the MWR research project on dolphin interactions with recreational fishing in October 2014 and is responsible for assisting the technical aspects of gear deployment and data collection. Tim lives in Fort Walton Beach, FL and is a hobbyist vintner, home restoration specialist, sailor, and wildlife observer.

Courtney Nelson Seely, BS: Ms. Seely began her career working for the Gulf Coast Zoo, AL as the exotic animal dietician and feedhouse manager from 2007-09. She maintained the health of zoo animals, prepared diets, organized daily enrichment, ordered and purchased supplies, and served as a zookeeper. She volunteered for Alabama's Share the Beach program where she coordinated and participated in sea

turtle nest patrols, nest measurements, relocation and excavation, monitoring and hatchling escort, and sea turtle rescue. She also obtained small animal experience as a volunteer vet technician with TLC Veterinary Clinic in Mobile, AL in 2009 where she assisted with surgeries and patient exams. She became involved with marine mammals in 2010 as a volunteer first responder for the Institute for Marine Mammal Studies in Gulfport, MS. She finished her BS in marine biology at the University of South Alabama and then became a primary responder and technician for the Dauphin Island Sea Lab's Manatee Sighting Network (DISL). In 2011 following the Deepwater Horizon Spill, DISL established the Alabama Marine Mammal Stranding Network (ALMMSN), were she became the Director and Stranding Coordinator through 2013. Ms. Seely participated in manatee health assessments, tagging and monitoring, and performed tracking of tagged manatees, maintenance/exchange in-field of tagging equipment on manatees, GPS satellite/telemetry and sonic tag passive acoustic monitoring operations and maintenance, behavior observations, photo-identification, stranding response and necropsies, and sample process and archiving. She directed and managed the ALMMSN, staff and volunteers during the Northern Gulf Cetacean Unusual Mortality Event and was primary lead on small cetacean stranding response and necropsies. Her duties included preparing reports and protocols, assisting writing and developing grant proposals, progress and final reports, publications, press releases, organizing and developing education outreach, and interfacing with collaborators in academia and with NOAA/NMFS and AL Dept. of Conservation and Natural Resources. She also organized and conducted training classes for volunteers, interns, staff, and collaborators. In 2013, she moved with her family to Albuquerque, NM for military deployment and is now relocating back to the Gulf Coast where she will reside in Navarre, FL. Courtney enjoys being with her family, the outdoors, boating, trail running, and physical conditioning.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE STATEMENT:

Dr. Steve Shippee serves as the environmental representative on the Okaloosa RESTORE Advisory Committee (ORAC).

He also is the manager and director of Marine Wildlife Response Group. As his company may benefit from receiving funding assistance, if selected, by Okaloosa County RESTORE grants, Dr. Shippee recognizes a probable conflict of interest and will take the following actions to avoid improper influence of ORAC consideration of proposals:

1) Dr. Shippee will not participate in ORAC discussions on the Destin Dolphin SMART proposal nor review and offer rankings of this proposal.

2) As directed by guidance of Okaloosa County Legal Staff, Dr. Shippee will not participate in committee discussions or review/ranking of any other project proposals under consideration that appear to be competing in nature with the Destin Dolphin SMART proposal.

Dolphin Sightseeing and Ecotourism Businesses in the Destin-Ft. Walton Bch. Area

Operator	Phone	Glass Bottom	Sailboat	Speed boat	Catamaran	Guided	Jet skis	Pontoons	Other	Capt	Website	Location
Adventure Marine	850-243-5721							Y			adventuremarina.com	Okaloosa Isle
AJ's	850-837-2222			SeaQuest		Y					dolphinsdestin.com	Harbor
AJ's	850-837-2222		Daniel Webster			Y				Pam Kane	dolphinsdestin.com	Harbor
Aloha Pontoons	850-269-3333					Y	Y	Y			alohapontoonrentals.com	Harbor
Blue Crab Water Sports	850-218-5504						Y	Y			bluecrabwatersports.com	Marine Café
Blue Heron Watersports	850-737-0607						Y	Y	Kayaks		blueheronpontoonrentals.com	Harbor
Boogies	850-654-4497	Glass Bottom				Y	Y	Y	Parasail	Ryan	boogieswatersports.com	Harbor
Captain Rex Sailing	850-650-8787		Nathaniel Bowditch			Y				Rex	bowditchsailing.com	Marina Café
Cattywampus Aquatic	850-586-0450				Cattywampus	Y				Tony/Rex	cattywampus.us	Fudpuckers
Crab Island Water Sports	850-243-2722					Y	Y	Y			crabislandwatersports.com	Brooks Bridge
Destin Cruise	850-259-8816		??							Frank	destincruise.net	Harbor
Destin Powerboats	850-217-5285			20' SeaRay			Y				destinpowerboats.com	Harbor
Destin Snorkel	850-269-2329				Sand Dollar	Y				Jessie	destinsnorkel.com	Harbor
Destin Snorkel	850-269-2329				Snuba Runner	Y				Challis	destinsnorkel.com	Harbor
Destin Snorkel	850-269-2329				Reef Runner	Y				Mutiple	destinsnorkel.com	Harbor
Destin Snorkel	850-269-2329				Kokomo	Y				Mutiple	destinsnorkel.com	Harbor
Destin Vacation	850-650-2628						Y	Y			destinvacationboatrentals.com	Harbor
Discount Watersports	850-654-0099						Y				discountwatersportsdestin.com	Harbor
Dockside	850-428-3313					Y	Y	Y	Parasail		boatrentalsindestin.com	Harbor
Emerald Coast Sailing	850-699-7454		Emerald Lady			Y					ecoastsailing.com	Harbor
Emerald Grand M/V	850-461-8388				Emerald Grand	Y					emeraldgrande.com/harborwalk-village	
Emerald Grand Shuttle	850-461-8388				Water Taxi	Y					emeraldgrande.com/harborwalk-village	
Extreme H2O	850-978-3060					Y	Y	Y	Parasail		xtremeh2o.net	East Pass Marina
Flipper's Adventures	850-837-0113				Flipper	Y					snorkeladventuresdestin.com/	Harbor
Fudpuckers	850-424-7625						Y	Y	Parasail		fudpuckerswatersports.com	Okaloosa Isle
Just Sailing	850-650-1990		Braveheart								justsaildestin.com	Harbor
Luthers	850-650-8733						Y	Y			lutherspontoon.com	Harbor
MobileSports LLC	850-687-1626			Banana Boat		Y					mobilesportsLLC.com	Harbor
Olin Marler	850-654-7113	Miss Florida				Y					olinmarlercharterboats.com	Harbor
Olin Marler	850-654-7113	Hanna Marie				Y					olinmarlercharterboats.com	Harbor
RMR Water Sports	850-391-tide							Y			destinfishingboatrentals.com	Ft. Walton
Sailaway Destin FL	850-376-4757		Sail Away			Y				Bryan	sailawaydestin.com	Marina Café
Sailing South	850-837-sail		Charters				Y	Y			sswatersports.com	Harbor
Sea Chase	850-607-0071						Y	Y	Kayaks	Sheri	seachasewaersports.com	Harbor
SeaBlaster	850-654-6888			Sea Blaster		Y				Larry	seablasterdestin.com	Harbor
Southern Star	850837-7741	Southern Star				Y				Steve	southernstardolphincruise.com	Harbor
SunVenture	850-424-6465				SunVenture						sunventurecruises.com	?
True Blue Pontoons	850-910-3636					Y		Y			truebluepontoonboatrentals.com	Elks Lodge
Wet-N-Wild	850-243-2628					Y	Y	Y			destinflboatrentals.com	Harbor

Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners
1804 Lewis Turner Blvd - Suite 100
Ft. Walton Beach, FL 32547

Destin Dolphin SMART

Dear Commissioners,

We represent businesses in Destin that provide dolphin sightseeing tours for our many visitors. We share a concern that harassment caused by uninformed boaters and swimmers attempting to come into close contact with these animals is resulting in a decline in their population around Destin. People illegally feed these wild animals, which causes them to lose fear of humans and readily approach boats looking for handouts rather than engaging in natural feeding and play behaviors. The science clearly shows this puts the animals at risk of injury and death. We need to better inform our guests and the general public about conservation of these animals, on which our nature tour businesses depend.

We agree to commit to a locally operated cooperative program that helps us provide outreach to enlighten the community about reducing harmful interactions with marine animals. We applaud Okaloosa County for considering a Destin Dolphin SMART program for RESTORE funding to create a legacy that ensures dolphin families will continue to thrive in our area.

Sincerely,

Participating Okaloosa County Boat Captains and Ecotourism Businesses

Printed name and signature:	Business name:
Val Costley	Destin Snorkel, LLC
Stephen Hebert	M/S Emerald Grande
Michael Jozwiak	Destin Snorkel LLC
Matt Jozwiak	Destin Snorkel LLC
Eric Carnahan	Destin Snorkel LLC
Laura Costley	Destin Snorkel LLC
Rex Walley	Capt. Rex's Sailing / Cattywampus
Capt. Cliff Atwell	Southern Star Dolphin Cruise / Buccaneer Pirate Ship

Page two: Support for Destin Dolphin SMART Program

Print Name and sign:		Business Name:
Pamela Kay Brundidge	Pamela Kay Brundidge	Silent Lady LLC Daniel Webster Clements
Alex Kent		Olin Marler Charters
Jaxon Mitchell	Jaxon Mitchell	local Captain
Randall Goodson		Captain
DANIEL MILLER		CAPTAIN
Tina J Velez		local Captain
GREG VELEZ		DIVING DEEP, LLC
David Carling		Destin Snorkel
Chris Gore		Destin Snorkel
ANDY EWERT		DESTIN SNORKEL
Kyle Lauch		Destin Snorkel
Dwight LANE		
Rose Bartlett	Rose Bartlett	Boogies GBB
Bob Young	Bob Young	Boogies GBB
Jessie Saint		Sand Dollar Destin (Dolphin + Shelling tours) Snorkel

Page 3: Support for Destin Dolphin SMART Program

Destin Dolphin SMART

Print Name and sign:

Business Name:

Verbal endorsements (Phone conversations)

- Captain Steve Wilson, owner of Southern Star Dolphin Cruise and Buccaneer Pirate Ship

- Captain Ryan Core, Boogie's Glass Bottom Boat

- SeaChase Watersports & Pontoons

WDC, 7 Nelson Street, Plymouth, MA, 02360
T +(508) 746-2522 F +(508)746-2537 E contact@whales.org W whales.org
WDC is a registered 501(c)3 non-profit organization.

Okaloosa RESTORE Advisory Committee
c/o Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners
1804 Lewis Turner Blvd, Suite 100
Fort Walton Beach, FL 32547

May 6, 2015

Letter of Support for Destin Dolphin Stewardship Program

Dear Committee members,

I am writing on behalf of WDC, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, in regards to the proposal seeking funds under the County's RESTORE Act to establish a dolphin stewardship program for Destin, Florida. As a founding partner of the Dolphin SMART Program (www.dolphinsmart.org), WDC has assisted in the development and implementation of the framework under which the proposed program would be emulated and developed. As a result, I am extremely supportive of the proposal to implement a similar voluntary education and outreach program in the Destin, Florida area, and encourage the committee to consider funding this initiative.

The panhandle region of Florida is known by regulatory agencies and conservation organizations alike as a hotbed' of harassment. Interactions between wild dolphins and members of the public, occurring through close vessel interaction or direct contact through swim-with or feeding activities, are of serious concern for wild dolphin welfare and conservation. The consequences of wild dolphin disturbance and harassment are well known, and the potential to mitigate these detrimental impacts provides a sound basis upon which to evaluate the huge potential for such a voluntary program to address, educate, and reform public attitudes and behaviors through community-based stewardship and ultimately protect dolphin populations in the Destin area.

With continued support and commitment from all program partners over the years and since its establishment in 2007, Dolphin SMART has been implemented in three major areas of the Southeast United States as well as Hawaii, and is serving to educate businesses and the public about the harms of closely interacting with wild dolphins and the benefits of responsible viewing and marine stewardship. Our commitment to this type of program underlines our shared belief in the potential for non-regulatory approaches to serve as an effective means to reach and activate the public on some of the most pressing local and regional marine conservation issues. A stewardship program targeting some of the primary stakeholders in local dolphin conservation ecotourism businesses and consumers provides an opportunity to engage and incentivize the public through a positive approach aimed to inspire accountability and reward.

Dolphin SMART uses numerous avenues, such as educational trainings, outreach events, media (print and social), and research, to engage and educate the community. The goal is to help reduce disturbance to wild dolphins, while promoting a new ethic regarding our relationship to the marine environment and its inhabitants.

I strongly encourage the review committee to consider its support for the development of the proposed stewardship program, modeled on the successful Dolphin SMART program, to minimize the potential for wild dolphin harassment by commercial viewing activities; reduce the demand for close interaction with wild dolphins that can result in harmful disturbance; guide advertising to reduce expectations of engaging in activities that constitute harassment; and promote stewardship of local coastal waterways and marine wildlife.

With warm regards,

Courtney S. Vail
Campaigns and Programs Manager
courtney.vail@whales.org
480-747-5015

WHALE AND DOLPHIN CONSERVATION
WDC

A world where every whale and dolphin is safe and free

Sarasota Dolphin Research Program

Chicago Zoological Society

1600 Ken Thompson Parkway **Phone: (941) 388-2705**
Sarasota, Florida 34236 USA **Fax: (941) 388-4223**
E-Mail: *rwells@mote.org* **Website: *www.sarasotadolphin.org***

Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners 30 April 2015
1804 Lewis Turner Blvd - Suite 100
Ft. Walton Beach, FL 32547

Dear Commissioners,

I write in support of the project proposal for Destin Dolphin SMART. The Sarasota Dolphin Research Program has been studying dolphin harassment issues for several decades and we have noted a steady increase in dolphin mortalities along the Gulf coast that result from harmful interactions between dolphins and human activities. We believe locally committed conservation efforts are a highly effective means of responding to this problem, by enabling outreach for businesses to enlighten the public about reducing harmful interactions with these ecologically important marine mammals. Establishment of a county-supported conservation program in Destin will provide a valuable legacy to future generations that ensures the long-term sustainability of the dolphins that live in the region.

We have worked for many years with the team members at Marine Wildlife Response Group to conduct research on dolphin population dynamics and health. Currently, we are engaged in a multi-year study to investigate practical methods that anglers can employ to reduce dolphin interactions with recreational fishing at Destin as well as other locations. The Destin Dolphin SMART project would be a natural complement to our ongoing study that builds on existing community collaboration towards a common goal. County support for a long-term monitoring program to continue tracking dolphin populations and human-interaction issues is vital to determining the success of this effort.

Sincerely,

Randall S. Wells, PhD
Director, Sarasota Dolphin Research Program

Destin Dolphin SMART:
A Stewardship Program to Promote Responsible Dolphin Ecotourism at Destin East Pass

A proposal from Marine Wildlife Response Group, Mary Esther, FL.
Point of Contact: Steve Shippee, PhD.

Photo: S. Shippee, 2010

Dolphin sightseeing is a major ecotourism enterprise in the Destin region, with many tour businesses catering to visitors' interest in observing these charismatic animals in the wild. Viewing bottlenose dolphins in their natural habitat is an exhilarating experience, but requires responsible stewardship to avoid close approaches and rapid boat movements that can harmfully disrupt their behaviors. Intentionally disturbing the natural behaviors of these animals is a form of harassment and is illegal under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Dolphin populations along the northern Gulf coast were severely impacted following the Deepwater Horizon event. Although the oil spill did not have measurable effects on our local dolphins, their survival may be threatened by human interactions and disturbance. Research shows that Destin East Pass is home to a resident community of about 100 dolphins that are frequently seen swimming along these sheltered waters. The young are born during spring-summer and are entirely dependent on maternal care. This is also the period of heightened tourism in our region, when visitors eagerly congregate in the clear waters of the East Pass and Crab Island where maternal dolphin groups are commonly seen.

Interactions occur when uninformed boaters and swimmers attempt to come in close contact with dolphins, which can result in injury to the animals and even death from boat strikes, line entanglements, and lethal ingestion of foreign objects. Strandings of infant dolphins have increased locally over the past decade, suggesting a population decline as old animals expire and young age classes diminish in size.

The resident dolphins of Destin, along with local dolphin ecotourism businesses, face an uncertain future if ongoing scientific studies show decreased reproductive success. This trend can be reversed, however, through a community-supported conservation program designed to encourage responsible stewardship of these animals that symbolize our pristine marine waters.

This project will be modeled after National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Dolphin SMART Program (www.dolphinsmart.org) which operates in several coastal communities to promote responsible dolphin viewing etiquette. The program advances science-based principles and guidelines in the Marine Mammal Protection Act to:

- Minimize the potential of wild dolphin harassment by commercial viewing activities.
- Reduce visitor demand for close interaction with dolphins that result in harmful disturbance.
- Guide advertising to reduce expectations of engaging in activities that constitute harassment.
- Promote stewardship of local coastal waterways and marine wildlife.

The acronym SMART refers to simple actions boaters can follow when viewing dolphins:

S stay back 50 yards to give animals space

M move cautiously around dolphins

A always use neutral gear when dolphins closely approach

R refrain from feeding and direct contact

T teach others to be responsible stewards of dolphins

NOAA's Dolphin SMART program is a voluntary recognition and education program encouraging responsible ecotourism practices. Participation is for commercial businesses that conduct wild dolphin tours, or that may opportunistically view wild dolphins. Promotional incentives are offered for partners that follow the program criteria and educate their customers about the importance of minimizing dolphin harassment. The program also includes an important monitoring component that provides data about dolphin behavioral characteristics around tourism activities and tracks population dynamics.

Too close for comfort!

Photo: S. Shippee, 2014

What is Destin Dolphin Smart?

Destin Dolphin SMART will be a collaborative program specifically tailored for our local ecotourism businesses to actively protect the wildlife resources on which their enterprise depends. NOAA can assist with development, but is unable to administer a Destin project due to agency funding limitations. Instead, the Destin program is proposed to be locally managed by an independent team of experienced biologists with Marine Wildlife Response Group who are already engaged in dolphin conservation work in the area. We will coordinate the participating commercial dolphin watch operators, jet-ski and pontoon rental companies, and charter fishing captains, and will provide outreach information for promoting conservation-based wildlife viewing that ultimately reduces harmful interactions with our flagship marine mammal species.

The program will host semi-annual meetings for ecotourism participants to gather and learn about local marine wildlife, share information on ways to better protect dolphins while engaging in successful business practices, and collectively communicate a philosophy to the public that encourages responsible wildlife viewing. Presentations will be given during the workshops by marine mammal experts about marine ecology and conservation initiatives focused on our local area. Information updates will be distributed throughout the year to participants to promote conservation practices.

Coordination will involve monthly visits by project staff to businesses for face-to-face discussion and program guidance. An immediate goal is to produce a brief instructional video for businesses to use in informing guests about dolphin viewing etiquette. A second goal is to build a website for disseminating information and advertising the participating tour operators.

In addition, a long-term monitoring effort will be established that utilizes volunteers from the community to collect data on dolphin abundance and behavior through a sighting network. Trained team members will periodically observe dolphins at the East Pass area by boat to gather information on human interactions and to provide friendly assistance to boaters that seek advice. The monitoring project will track our local dolphin population status and identify critical threats for informing NOAA biologists and law enforcement.

Program Funding and Support

The Destin Dolphin SMART program seeks support from an Okaloosa RESTORE grant over a three-year period that will transition to outside sources in future years. RESTORE funds will support: partial salaries for a program coordinator and experienced field assistants; developing program materials for distribution at semi-annual workshops and informal meetings; establishing a dedicated internet site; and purchase of supplies for on-water monitoring (e.g., boat fuel/rental and data collection gear). Participants will be asked to contribute materials and resources (e.g., meeting space and supplies, boat access, sighting data). Future continued funding will come from memberships of program participants, possible tourism department support, grants sought from private and federal sources, and sales of information guides describing our local dolphin communities, as well as collectible items of interest to visitors that will be marketed by ecotourism businesses (e.g., shirts, photos, videos).

Local ecotourism businesses share a belief that a long-term program is needed to insure a sustainable dolphin population continues to thrive in our region. While program participation is voluntary, we hope businesses will join in fostering a new paradigm of green wildlife watching practices that will attract visitors to our area. A RESTORE grant will provide a lasting benefit to the local community by restoring and protecting this important marine species of great value to local tourism, and establish a legacy program that provides enduring opportunities for wildlife ecotourism into future generations.

Photo: S. Shippee, 2014

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