

Alabama Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau



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Local Dolphin Watching Industry Looks to Self-Regulate

Gulf Shores/Orange Beach, AL—With their playful and almost mystical presence, pods of wild dolphins seem to attract eager bystanders like bees are drawn to honey. However in an effort to preserve the integrity of the dolphin watching industry on the Alabama Gulf Coast and to promote good stewardship of dolphins in the wild, 15 tour operators gathered at a recent Dolphin SMART workshop to discuss their issues and concerns. The workshop was organized by Joanne McDonough, who is a part of the nature tourism initiative funded by [Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center](#), [Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Extension](#) and the [Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau](#).

“Creating opportunities for the public to enjoy the wildlife in our area that provide a quality experience for visitors and a safe environment for the bottlenose dolphin is a challenge for our local tour operators,” McDonough said. “As a group, they expressed a need to become better educated about the daily lives of our local, wild dolphin and adhere to sustainable practices that reduce the risks of disrupting their natural behaviors such as migration, breathing, nursing, feeding and sheltering. So I thought it would be a great idea to bring Celeste Weimer, program coordinator for Dolphin SMART.”

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

During her hour-long presentation, Weimer discussed several benefits of the program.

“What’s so unique about this program is that it is a prime example of self-regulation,” she said. “Customers have the benefit of seeing their captains demonstrate responsible viewing while we gain valuable research information from their participation.”

In exchange for a company's participation, they will receive a logo and flag to display on their vessel, a link on the Dolphin SMART website, and a vast amount of educational and research materials in addition to media publicity.

While the local captains confer on their options and consider joining this program, Weimer gave the audience a few take-aways, such as the following Dolphin SMART tips:

- **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 swimming with, touching or feeding wild dolphins.**
- **Teach others to be Dolphin SMART.**

“Wildlife recreation, such as dolphin watching, has a major impact on the economy, and I think people are surprised when they hear the numbers,” McDonough said.

According to the 2006 National Survey of Wildlife Related-Recreation from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, almost a third of the adult population reported participating in wildlife watching and spent over \$45 billion on their activities. Not surprising, marine mammals attracted nearly 4 million watchers in 2006.

McDonough added, “The goal of the nature tourism initiative is to support, enhance and grow this industry, not regulate it. The fact that, as a group, these tour operators want to voluntarily team up and develop sustainable wildlife viewing practices, such as the Dolphin SMART program, is a positive step in promoting responsible stewardship of our natural resources in ways that benefit the environment as well as the economy. This is a unique opportunity to work together, and we are in the initial phase of determining the framework for the development and implementation of the Dolphin SMART program locally.”

Nature tourism business owners who would like more information or assistance may contact Joanne McDonough at 251-974-1510 or jmcdonough@gulfshores.com. For more information on the Dolphin SMART program, visit www.sanctuaries.noaa.gov/dolphinmart.