



Wild Bottlenose Dolphin Conservation



Photo credit: Dolphin Ecology Project

All marine mammals are federally protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), which prohibits the “taking” of wild marine mammals. Take means to harass, hunt, capture, collect, or kill, or to attempt any of these activities. Harassment is a form of take and means any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance which has the potential to injure a marine mammal in the wild; or the potential to disturb a marine mammal in the wild by causing disruption of behavioral patterns. In addition, feeding, or attempting to feed, wild marine mammals is also illegal.

Threats

Bottlenose dolphins are distributed throughout the coastal waters of the Southeastern U.S. and live in bays, sounds, and estuaries close to shore. Therefore, people are more readily able to enjoy viewing bottlenose dolphins in the wild, but it also puts the animals at greater risk to human-related impacts. Human-related threats known to bottlenose dolphins include entanglement in recreational and commercial fishing gear, illegal feeding, activities causing harassment, boat strikes, marine debris impacts, and chemical contaminants.



Photo credit: Sarasota Dolphin Research Program

What is a Stranding?



Photo credit: Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute

Marine mammals are sometimes found sick, injured, or dead along our beaches. They can also become entrapped or disoriented and unable to return to their natural habitat without assistance. These events are called strandings and require investigation by trained Marine Mammal Stranding Network personnel.

If you see a stranded or injured marine mammal, immediately call the Marine Mammal Stranding Network at: 1-877-942-5343 (from NC through FL) or 1-866-755-6622 (from ME through VA).

Bottlenose Dolphin

(Tursiops truncatus)

Harassment

Many human-related threats stem from illegal feeding and harassment, which cause close dolphin-human interactions leading to: animal behavioral changes, injury, and death. Specifically, chronic feeding causes dolphins to: 1) lose their natural fear of humans; 2) become dependent on humans for handouts; 3) abandon their natural hunting practices; and 4) teach their calves to become dependent on people for food. Dolphins are then more likely to be struck by boats, become entangled in fishing gear, remove bait and catch from fishermen's lines, or suffer extreme retaliatory acts (e.g. shooting) by boaters or anglers.

Dolphins can be disturbed or harassed by the presence of humans and watercraft. Certain critical survival behaviors, such as maternal care, feeding, and resting, are particularly vulnerable to disturbance. Chronic disturbance may lead to: 1) long-term negative impacts, such as compromised health, stress, injury, reduced reproductive success, and displacement from, or avoidance of, important habitats; or 2) injury or death, such as boat strikes.



Photo credits: Mote Marine Laboratory

What is Harassment and What Does it Look Like?



Photo credits: Dolphin Ecology Project

Harassment occurs when an animal's behaviors are disrupted or they are injured from human impacts. Wild dolphins can be easily disturbed by the presence of humans and watercraft. Any human caused change to a dolphin's behavior may constitute harassment, or disturbance.

Signs of disturbance include:

- Abrupt changes in speed or direction of travel, including underwater course changes;
- Repeatedly turning or moving away from vessel;
- Rapid swimming at the surface;
- Repeated tail slapping, breaching, or chuffing (loud exhalations) at surface;
- Female attempting to shield calf with her body; and
- Abrupt changes in group spacing (e.g., groups splitting apart or moving closer together).

Report feeding or harassment of wild dolphins to NMFS Law Enforcement at: 1-800-853-1964.



How You Can Help!

Dolphin Do's and Don't's

Keep dolphins wild!

- Do:** Release catch and dispose of bycatch quietly and away from dolphins when and where possible without violating any state or federal fishing regulations.
- Do:** Reuse leftover bait by freezing or giving to your fishing neighbor instead of dumping into the water, which may attract dolphins.



Photo credits: Dolphin Ecology Project

Prevent harassment of wild dolphins!

- Do:** Stay at least 50 yards away from dolphins when viewing from a vessel. Use binoculars for best viewing.
- Do:** Look Before You Book! Book wild dolphin viewing tours with responsible businesses (Visit: www.dolphinmart.org to find responsible dolphin tours in your area.)
- Don't:** Pursue, swim with, or touch wild dolphins.
- Don't:** Encircle dolphins with vessel(s) or entrap them between vessels.



Prevent watercraft related injuries!

- Do:** Put your vessel's engine in neutral if in close vicinity of dolphins.
- Don't:** Drive watercraft through or over groups of dolphins.



Photo credits: Mote Marine Laboratory

Prevent wildlife entanglements!

- Do:** Recycle fishing line.
(To learn more, visit: www.fishinglinerecycling.org)
- Do:** Reel in fishing line if dolphins are near.
- Do:** Change fishing locations if dolphins show interest in bait or catch.
- Do:** Check gear and terminal tackle to avoid unwanted line breaks and use circle or corrodible hooks (non-stainless steel).
- Don't:** Cast towards dolphins.
- Don't:** Litter, it is illegal.



Photo credit: Sarasota Dolphin Research Program

DON'T Feed Wild Dolphins... It's Harmful and Illegal
Protect Dolphins... Admire Them From a Distance

Bottlenose Dolphin

(*Tursiops truncatus*)

Science, Service, Stewardship



Identification and Distribution

- Bottlenose dolphins are found around the world in temperate, tropical, and subtropical waters.
- In the Southeastern U.S., there are two distinct types of bottlenose dolphins: coastal and offshore.
- Coastal bottlenose dolphins are smaller and lighter in color, while their offshore counterparts are larger, darker in coloration with smaller flippers and rostrums.
- Coastal adults range in size from 6 – 9 ft and 300 – 600 lbs; males are typically larger than females.
- Other identifying features include:
 - Robust body and head with a short, thick, well-defined rostrum (i.e. snout);
 - Cone-shaped teeth;
 - Grey skin with a lighter belly, usually white or pink in color; and
 - Dorsal fin located mid-back, with a broad base that is tall, curved, and tapers to a point.
- Individual dolphins can be identified by the notches, nicks, scars, and shape of their dorsal fin.
- Dolphins typically swim 2-4 mph, but can reach speeds of 20 mph for brief periods.
- Coastal dolphins typically do not hold their breath for more than 5 minutes.



Photo credits: NOAA

Biology

- Long-lived: males can live 40-45 yrs, females can live 50+ yrs.
- Sexual maturity: females 5-13 yrs and males at 9-14 yrs.
- Gestation: 12 months for females, and they typically give birth every 3-6 yrs.
- Calves: nurse for 18-20 months and stay with their mothers for 3-6 yrs.
- Acoustics: dolphins use passive listening and/or high frequency echolocation to locate prey. They also have their own signature whistle.
- Prey: dolphins are opportunistic and eat a wide variety of fish.
- Social: dolphin groups typically contain 2-15 individuals, with groups continually breaking apart and reforming new social groups. Therefore, dolphins live in groups, not pods because the term “pod” refers to a permanent social group.



Photo credits: NOAA

Behavior

- Social interactions typically involve breeding, playing, aggression, and gentle body contact, such as rubbing.
- Travel is characterized by persistent movement in a consistent direction. Dolphins may travel alone or in groups.
- Resting may resemble traveling but is characterized by tight group formation, slow movement, and slow, methodical breath intervals. When resting, dolphins may actually be sleeping, which is resting one half of their brain at a time.
- Calves maintain “baby position” while swimming, mom surfaces first, and the calf surfaces slightly after and behind.
- Bottlenose dolphins use a variety of techniques to pursue and capture prey. Common feeding behaviors observed in the Southeastern U.S. include herding (especially along seawalls), rooting, kerplunking, fish tossing and whacking. Other feeding strategies include strand feeding, mud-ring feeding and mud-plume feeding.



Photo credits: Savannah State University



About NOAA Fisheries Service, Southeast Regional Office

We are dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, fisheries management, enforcement, and habitat conservation. NOAA Fisheries Service is a leading voice for commercial and recreational fisheries and continues to focus its efforts on sustaining our marine resources. Visit <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov> for more information.