



Humans feeding and interacting with wild dolphins leads to injuries and federal prosecutions in southeast U.S.

NOAA warns this puts dolphins and people in dangerous situations

Cases of injury and federal prosecution are on the rise as people continue to feed and interact with wild dolphins. Recently, four people and two companies in Florida were charged with violating the [Marine Mammal Protection Act](#) after they were caught feeding wild dolphins. NOAA experts and enforcement agents remain concerned about both dolphin and human safety and are asking for the public's help by simply leaving wild dolphins alone.

"Interacting with dolphins includes feeding, swimming with and petting; basically anything from a boat or in the water that might change the animal's behavior," explains Laura Engleby, marine mammal branch chief for NOAA Fisheries Southeast Region. "We've heard reports from various places of dolphins behaving more aggressively towards people and that feeding is an ongoing problem."

More people are seeking out dolphins to feed or play with them and then suffer injuries from bites or other behaviors displayed by dolphins. Recent examples include people being bitten by a wild dolphin in Slidell, La., and reported increases in potentially dangerous swimming interactions with wild dolphins in Panama City, Fla. Marine mammal biologists warn, dolphins are large wild animals and people interacting with them in any way may lead to injuries for both.

"Our behaviors and actions towards wild dolphins are having very real consequences for both dolphins and people," explained Stacey Horstman, bottlenose dolphin conservation coordinator for NOAA Fisheries Southeast Region. "Feeding dolphins places them at risk of injury or death from boats, entanglements in fishing gear, ingestion of items such as fishing hooks and contaminated food, and intentional injury by fishermen frustrated by the animals taking their bait or catch."

According to biologists, when dolphins are fed, they learn to associate people with food and put themselves in dangerous situations as they readily approach people, boats, and fishing gear. Dolphins will even remove bait and catch directly from fishermen's lines and teach these behaviors to their young.

These behaviors also result in an increase in human violence towards dolphins. Three fishermen have been convicted in recent years for [shooting or throwing pipe bombs at dolphins](#). And law enforcement continues to investigate the [case](#) of a dolphin found dead in Alabama after being stabbed with a screwdriver.

The best way for people to keep themselves and dolphins safe from injuries is to enjoy them in their natural habitat from a safe distance and without touching, feeding, attempting to feed, swimming with or interacting with them in any way. Harassing, harming, killing or feeding wild dolphins is prohibited under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. Violations can be prosecuted either civilly or criminally and are punishable by up to \$100,000 in fines and up to one year in jail per violation.

For more information:

To report a suspected violation, contact NOAA's law enforcement national hotline at 1-800-853-1964.

NOAA Fisheries encourages everyone to learn about wild dolphins and participate in conservation efforts by practicing the following:

Dolphin Do's and Don'ts:

Do: Help protect wild dolphins and prevent behavior changes.

Don't: Feed or attempt to feed wild dolphins. It is harmful and illegal – and dolphins sometimes become aggressive when seeking food and may bite when teased. For more information, visit www.dontfeedwilddolphins.org

Do: Keep you and dolphins safe! Enjoy seeing wild dolphins from a distance of at least 50 yards (half a football field) and with binoculars. Learn more at: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/education/southeast/> and www.dolphinmart.org

Don't: touch, swim with, chase, or try to interact with wild dolphins.