



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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DOLPHIN DEATHS FROM RECREATIONAL FISHING GEAR ARE ON THE RISE *NOAA Recommends "Best Practices" for Recreational Fishers*

The number of bottlenose dolphins stranding dead with recreational fishing gear attached appears to be escalating throughout Florida – a trend that is beginning to concern biologists and conservation agencies.

So far this year, NOAA Fisheries Service's Southeast Region has received a significant increase in reports of bottlenose dolphin strandings associated with recreational gear from several stranding network participants throughout the state, including Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota and Hubbs-Sea World Research Institute (HSWRI) in Orlando.

Mote staff have recovered five dolphins since January with recreational gear attached. Four died as a direct result of the fishing gear – three adults from ingestion of lures, hooks and line, and one calf from entanglement that nearly cut off its tail. For all of 2005, Mote reported only one animal stranded in the Sarasota Bay area with recreational gear attached, and it was determined the gear did not contribute to the animal's death. The four dead adults recovered this year were all well-known, long-term residents of Sarasota Bay. The two males had been observed since their births 17 and 22 years ago, and had no known previous history of interacting with fishing gear.

This year, HSWRI staff have recovered six dead animals with gear present. Four showed signs that the gear significantly contributed to the dolphins' mortality. Last year, HSWRI recovered only two animals with recreational gear attached.

"The mortalities from recreational fishing gear, and the interest shown by the resident dolphins in fishing boats, is unprecedented in my 36-plus years of research in Sarasota Bay, Tampa Bay, and Charlotte Harbor," said Dr. Randall Wells, director of Mote Marine Laboratory's Center for Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Research and manager of the Sarasota Dolphin Research Program. "It seems urgently important that we get the word out to anglers about the situation."

These lethal interactions with recreational fishing gear may be the result of dolphins being fed by boaters and fishermen. This feeding can cause dolphins to become habituated to humans and may teach them to steal recreational fishermen's bait or catch. These dolphins are at increased risk of entanglement in recreational gear, of swallowing hooks and lures, and of boat strikes, when they have learned to associate humans with food.

NOAA Fisheries Service is actively working with Mote, HWSRI, and other partners to better understand these interactions and find ways to prevent them. Based on discussions with fishermen and direct observations, biologists have developed a list of “Best Fishing Practices” recreational fishermen can follow to reduce or avoid harmful interactions with bottlenose dolphins and improve the quality of their fishing experience.

Best Fishing Practices for Avoiding Interactions with Wild Dolphins:

1. Never feed wild dolphins – it is against federal law and is harmful to the dolphins.
2. Avoid tossing leftover bait to dolphins if they are nearby. Make use of leftover bait by taking it home to freeze for later or by giving it to your fishing neighbor.
3. Check your gear and terminal tackle to make sure they are in good shape and will not break too easily, resulting in a lost fish with a hook that could be eaten by a dolphin.
4. Avoid fishing in an area where dolphins are actively feeding – dolphins may mistake your bait or catch for food.
5. Do not release caught fish in the presence of dolphins – this reinforces the association of recreational fishing activities with a food source. Anglers should try to release the fish as far from the dolphin and as quietly as possible.
6. Change fishing locations if dolphins are showing interest in your bait or catch.
7. Do not cast your line toward a dolphin.
8. Use corrodible hooks – any hook other than stainless steel.
9. Use circle hooks – it is believed that they reduce injuries to fish and dolphins.
10. Never try to reel in a dolphin that may be hooked – if a dolphin is hooked and the hook is set, cut the line as close to the dolphin as safely possible. If the hook is not set, put slack on the line and give the dolphin time to release itself.
11. Stay at least 50 yards away from wild dolphins while boating or using personal watercraft.
12. Stow used fishing line. Make sure to collect any broken or used fishing lines to discard in recycling bins (Please visit the Monofilament Recovery and Recycling Program Web site for a list of bin locations: http://floridaconservation.org/mrrp/bin_information.asp). If a recycling bin is not available, please discard in a secure bin. It’s against Florida law to intentionally discard monofilament into area waters because such line can kill or injure marine mammals, birds and sea turtles.

“Although in the last two months, we have not had any reports of strandings associated with recreational fishing gear, we remain concerned because the number of dolphins killed or injured as a result of entanglement or hooking with recreational fishing gear could still continue to rise this year,” said David Bernhart, Assistant Regional Administrator for NOAA Fisheries Service Protected Resources Division in St. Petersburg. “All anglers enjoy being out on the water and viewing wild dolphins, and they don’t want to see them harmed, so we encourage anglers to follow these commonsense guidelines. In addition, we’d like to hear their insights and ideas on this growing problem and potential additional solutions.”

If you have more information that could help NOAA protect dolphins from being harmed by recreational fishing gear, please call Stacey Carlson at (727) 824-5312. If you see an injured dolphin, marine mammal, or sea turtle, please call the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission toll free: 1-888-404-FWCC (1-800-404-3922).

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitats through scientific research, management, and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

In 2007 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, celebrates 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the Survey of the Coast in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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Media Note

Photos Available

Credit all photos to Mote Marine Laboratory Stranding Investigations Program

<http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/media/images/index.htm>

Frequently Asked Questions - bottlenose dolphin depredatory (stealing) behavior and deaths associated with recreational fishing gear

<http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/protres.htm#faq>

NOAA Fisheries Service's Protect Dolphins Campaign:

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/education/protectdolphins.htm>