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Attitudes Toward Illegal Feeding and Harassment of Wild Dolphins in Panama City

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A recent study in Panama City, Florida, found that concern for the protection of wild dolphins does not necessarily translate into adherence to or even awareness of laws and regulations designed to ensure dolphins' well-being. Many of those who expressed the most concern about protecting wild dolphins also indicated interest in feeding, swimming with, and touching dolphins in the wild. These activities are illegal under the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act and considered harmful by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Service.

Panama City is a known historic hot-spot for illegally feeding and harassing (i.e., swimming with, touching, or petting) bottlenose dolphins in the wild (Goldin, 2012). Since the late 1990s, NOAA Fisheries has conducted numerous outreach in various forms to educate people about the law and how to safely view dolphins in the wild. Illegal feeding and harassment of wild dolphins, however, continues in Panama City despite these outreach efforts (Goldin, 2012). This study was designed to: (a) better understand and define different user groups who participate in dolphin feeding and harassment activities; (b) assess the effectiveness of various education and outreach tools that were implemented; (c) measure public awareness and knowledge of wild dolphin conservation; and (d) determine if there are more applicable and appropriate outreach tools to convey the outreach messages to the intended audience.

The sociable, charismatic nature of dolphins has ensured their prominence in mass entertainment as well as the general public's fascination with the species (Gales, Hindell, & Kirkwood, 2003; Lavigne, Scheffer, & Kellert, 1999). A substantial portion of Panama City's economy is associated with wildlife-related recreation, much of it involving viewing and closely interacting with (i.e., swimming with, touching, or petting) wild dolphins. Advertising for opportunities to closely interact in the wild with these marine mammals is abundant. With such commonplace messaging, human–dolphin interactions are increasingly viewed as acceptable and more people desire to interact with dolphins in the wild.

A combination of on-site surveys and telephone interviews were conducted throughout 2011. The sample included residents ($n = 205$), visitors ($n = 171$), and operators of local water-based commercial businesses ($n = 89$) in Panama City.

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The survey found high levels of overall concern for the protection of wild dolphins in Panama City. Residents (88%), visitors (91%), and business operators (84%) all expressed concern for protecting wild dolphins. Compared to older businesses (i.e., those in operation for more than the median of 13 years), newer businesses were more likely to be very concerned about protecting dolphins. Vessel-based businesses (i.e., those depending on boats, such as chartered fishing excursions and wildlife viewing trips), compared to non-vessel-based businesses (e.g., water-related rentals, hospitality services), were less likely to be very concerned about the protection of dolphins.

Twenty-three percent of residents, 29% of visitors, and 38% of business operators had heard or read something that made it seem all right to swim with, touch, or pet dolphins in the wild (i.e., illegal activities that may cause harassment of the species). Thirty percent of residents and 47% of visitors expressed an interest in feeding dolphins in the wild, while 31% of residents and 42% of visitors were interested in swimming with, touching, or petting dolphins in the wild. Most indicated that this desire developed from television, movies, aquariums, word of mouth, personal experiences, zoos, and wildlife parks.

Despite the concern for and interest in dolphins, many did not know that feeding and interacting with dolphins in the wild are illegal and harmful. For example, only about half of residents (56%) and businesses (55%) knew that feeding dolphins is illegal and harmful, while visitors most commonly said that they did not know (31%). Forty percent of businesses believed that feeding dolphins in the wild is illegal but not harmful. A third of business operators (31%) indicated that swimming with, touching, or petting dolphins in the wild is illegal but not harmful to dolphins. Less than a majority of residents (41%), visitors (33%), and business operators (39%) were aware that such behavior is both illegal and harmful.

Vessel-based businesses were more likely than non-vessel-based businesses to say that feeding dolphins in the wild is illegal but not harmful (45% vs. 25%, respectively). While both newer and older businesses recognized that swimming with, touching, and petting dolphins in the wild is harmful, the newer businesses were more likely to say that such activity is not illegal. Chartered fishing trip operators were the most likely to say that feeding wild dolphins is illegal but not harmful.

About half of the businesses said they *always* instructed their guests on: (a) how to view wild dolphins without disturbing them (52%) and (b) why it is important to not disturb wild dolphins (51%). Newer businesses were more likely to always provide such information compared to older businesses. About half of the businesses (58%) would provide, display, or play pre-recorded educational materials to guests if such materials were provided to them free of charge.

Signs at marinas and boat ramps, boating safety education courses, public service announcements on TV, and the Internet in general were among the top-ranked methods for disseminating dolphin-related information. Between 50% and 60% of residents, visitors, and businesses indicated that marina/boat ramp signs and boating safety education courses would be very effective. These rankings will help NOAA Fisheries Service and other organizations prioritize media and develop future messaging and outreach, including the continuation of NOAA's "Don't Feed Wild Dolphins" Public Service Announcement (PSA) campaign (www.dontfeedwilddolphins.org).

In summary, the survey highlighted the undesirable consequences of Panama City dolphin-related advertising and media in shaping public attitudes toward the species. Despite the outreach conducted by NOAA Fisheries Service, this study reinforces the need for NOAA and its partnering organizations to produce messaging that counterbalances inaccurate beliefs and irresponsible forms of recreation.

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