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Coastal Settings

4568 Long Beach Road, Southport

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Dolphins appealing but from a distance

Movies and television shows that depict people swimming with dolphins may do more harm than good for the marine mammals. Well-intentioned folks who want to commune with nature may try to take a watery ride with a dolphin -- and put these creatures in harm's way.

Dolphins that beg for handouts from boaters can get too close to turning propellers and sustain serious injuries. Because dolphins are social animals, the begging behavior and dependence on handouts can upset their groups, called pods. The animals may lose the ability to survive, and calves may not learn to find food in the wild. Human food can make dolphins sick, again threatening their chances of survival.

People can also suffer from interactions with dolphins. As with most wild animals, dolphins can be defensive or behave aggressively when humans approach. They have been known to bite them and even pull them from boats into the water.

Folks who persist in pursuing close encounters with dolphins should know that the Marine Mammal Protection Act forbids harassing, feeding, hunting, capturing or killing them. Violating this act carries a maximum penalty of \$20,000 and one year in jail.

Observing dolphins from a safe distance, however, is not illegal. The National Marine Fisheries Service advises boaters to stay at least 50 yards away and let these wild animals live nature's way.

Based on information in "Protect Dolphins: Admire Them From a Distance," a brochure published by the National Marine Fisheries Service. For more information about dolphins and the Marine Mammal Protection Act, contact at 301-713-2289.



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