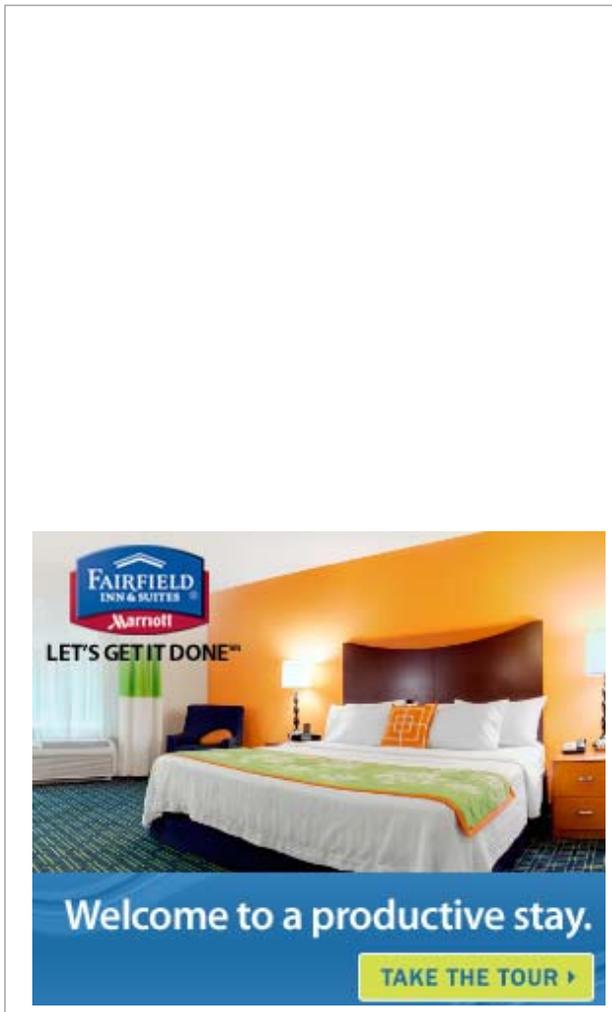


## New program to help with dolphin conservation

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A new federal program aims to reduce harassment of wild dolphins by Hawaii tour boats while promoting responsible viewing.

Training about compliance with the voluntary NOAA "Dolphin Smart" program kicked off Wednesday, following a model they say has worked in other states.

Seeing dolphins in the wild is a popular activity for tourists and locals alike across Hawaii.

A federal program called "Dolphin Smart" wants to make sure it's done in a responsible way that doesn't cross the line of laws that protect wild marine mammals.

It aims to recognize compliant companies while discouraging others from perpetuating "swim with dolphin" and up-close sightings or interactions in their itineraries and marketing.

"We're concerned about 'swim with dolphins' and also operators that aren't viewing responsibly, those that are approaching too close, that are running through pods," said Dolphin Smart's Hawaii coordinator Laura McCue. "They're doing activities called leap-frogging where they get in the predictable path of the dolphin group, throw people in or put their vessel in the path and then the dolphins have to swim by them."

Similar problems became so prevalent in the Southeast such as Florida and Alabama that conscientious operators themselves came to the federal government asking what could be done to enforce better compliance with federal viewing guidelines, which say [stay 50 yards away and don't feed, swim with or harass wild dolphins](#).

NOAA said part of the solution, besides enforcement and fines, came in the form of "Dolphin Smart" vendor and visitor education.

"We really hope to reduce their expectations of having these interactions with dolphins, because it's not an expectation for example with humpback whales, everyone's OK with just viewing," McCue said. "We want that

expectation for dolphin species as well."

Dozens of operators attended Dolphin Smart's first Hawaii training.

"As an operator we want to be responsible for how the dolphins are viewed, same with whales, monk seals and turtles," said Mel Wills of Holoholo Charters on Kauai.

Some said they felt NOAA is going about the program the right way.

"Some really important things to us is it's voluntary," Wills said.

He adds the program will work well with what they're already trying to do to promote responsible viewing.

"We have never had any swim-with-dolphins operations on Kauai, and we've all frowned upon them," Wills said. "We've had some advertising show up, people advertising that they 'may swim with dolphins,' and I've called those operators and said, what are you guys doing?"

Participants will have to prove they know legal requirements and proper viewing practices and go through annual evaluations to earn and keep the Dolphin Smart designation.

NOAA also seeks what they call "proud supporters" to earn the Dolphin Smart designation -- hotels, travel agencies, concierges and others who refer guests only to compliant operators, and who help visitors understand how proper viewing distances fosters dolphin

conservation.

More information: [Hawaiian Islands Dolphin Smart website](#)

Dolphin SMART guidelines:

S "Stay at least 50 yards from dolphins"

M "Move away carefully if dolphins show signs of disturbance"

A "Always put your engine in neutral when dolphins are near"

R "Refrain from feeding, touching or swimming with wild dolphins"

T "Teach others to be Dolphin SMART"

To report wildlife harassment, call NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement 24-hour hotline #(800) 853-1964.

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