



Nature Tourism Initiative

Along Alabama's Gulf Coast

March 31, 2009 - For Immediate Release

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Registration Opens for Dolphin SMART Program on AL Gulf Coast

GULF SHORES and ORANGE BEACH, Ala. — Continuing to encourage the responsible viewing of wild dolphins along the Alabama Gulf Coast, the area will hold its first **Dolphin SMART training workshop** for 2009. Tour operators, especially captains and owners, are encouraged to attend as this session is the first step to becoming recognized as a Dolphin SMART business. The workshop is set for Tuesday, April 21, 2009, from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Orange Beach Welcome Center.

“Our Gulf Coast is a premiere destination for viewing wild bottlenose dolphin in their natural habitat,” said Joanne McDonough of the Nature Tourism Initiative. “However if we approach wild dolphins too closely, move too quickly or make too much noise, we increase the risk of disrupting their natural behaviors. This program provides tour operators with detailed knowledge about the laws, responsible viewing practices and the local dolphin research.”

Dolphin SMART began in the Florida Keys as a voluntary participation program for businesses that seeks to educate people about responsible viewing of wild dolphin. It was developed by NOAA's [National Marine Sanctuary](#) and [National Marine Fisheries Service](#), the [Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society](#) and the [Dolphin Ecology Project](#). The program is made possible in Alabama through the support of the [Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources \(Coastal Section\)](#), the [Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau](#) and the [Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium](#).

The acronym “SMART” is a reminder of the basic principles of dolphin viewing etiquette:

- Stay at least 50 yards from dolphins
- Move away slowly if the dolphins show signs of disturbance
- Always put your vessel engine in neutral when dolphins are near
- Refrain from feeding, touching or swimming with wild dolphins
- Teach others to be Dolphin SMART.

“By choosing to follow these principles, tour operators demonstrate their care and concern for dolphin conservation and set good examples of viewing wildlife in the eyes of the public,” McDonough added.

In November 2008, L.A. Watersports, which operates out of Orange Beach, became the first business in the state of Alabama to be recognized as a Dolphin SMART business.

Once a business meets all of the necessary requirements for recognition, the Dolphin SMART business can be easily identified since it will receive a program flag and decals to display on the vessel as well as the use of the official logo in their advertising. Each year, the charter will be evaluated to ensure it is continuing to meet program standards.

Although participation in the workshop is free, registration is required by Thursday, April 16, and can be completed by contacting the program's coordinator Kelly Brinkman at 251-621-1216, ext. 232.

For more information on the Dolphin SMART program, visit www.sanctuaries.noaa.gov/dolphinSMART.

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About the Nature Tourism Initiative:

In 2007, the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium and the Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center joined forces to oversee the development of the Nature Tourism Initiative. This three-year project is designed to evaluate the nature-based businesses in Baldwin and Mobile Counties (in Alabama) and provide resources to meet their needs. Charged with this mission, Joanne McDonough's mission is two-fold: (1) to work with local businesses and communities to provide a quality nature experience for the guests (2) while also encouraging good stewardship and sustainability of the area's natural resources. For more information, visit www.agccvb.org/business-of-nature.