

Agency looks at new rules so swimmers don't disturb Hawaii's dolphins

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff

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WAIANA, Hawaii — Allison Alterman likes to swim in the ocean near her home on Hawaii's Big Island. Sometimes she will see spinner dolphins swimming nearby.

Spinner dolphins are a small dolphin species, and they love to show off and leap from the water.

When the dolphins group together close to the shore, tour boats often get close to them. The boats drop off passengers in the water to swim with the dolphins.

Alterman said that's a problem for the dolphins, who can't rest "because they're surrounded."

Dolphins Need To Rest In Daytime

Scientists are worried that these human visitors are bothering the animals, because they're nocturnal, which means they're most active at night. When they come into the shore during the day, they need to rest.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is a government agency that protects the oceans. The agency is preparing to suggest rules to help protect the dolphins. It could make a rule against swimming with spinner dolphins. Or it could tell people they can't go to shallow bays when the dolphins are resting. Bays offer dolphins a calm

shelter from ocean waves because they are surrounded by land except on the side that leads out to the ocean.

Bothering the dolphins can "affect their long-term health," said Ann Garrett. She works at the National Marine Fisheries Service, which is part of NOAA. She helps protect marine animals in the Pacific Islands.

Rules Could Affect 200 Businesses

Garrett said this agency also plans to propose rules in June. The regulations could affect more than 200 businesses in Hawaii.

Claudia Merrill is the co-owner of a business on the Big Island called Dolphin Discoveries. She said she would welcome some rules, especially if they stop people from swimming with dolphins from late morning to midafternoon. That's when dolphins get most of their rest.

Merrill also said that tour guides must be taught to understand when dolphins want to rest. One big indication is when a pod of dolphins synchronizes their swims and dives so they move together.

"It should be a sustainable industry. It can be a sustainable industry," Merrill said. Her business is in Kailua-Kona, a town on the Big Island.

Some Tours Let Dolphins Get Midday Rest

Some operators in Kona follow rules made by local tours, such as avoiding certain dolphin resting areas between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Yet Merrill said only a few of the coast tour operators she knows about follow these rules.

Garrett said her agency has heard reports that boats sometimes chase down dolphins at high speed. Sometimes they even make a circle around them to force them into an area.

Hawaii's spinner dolphins feast on fish and small crabs that come up from deep in the ocean at night. When the day starts, the dolphins go to shallow bays to hide from tiger sharks and other predators.

Sometimes the dolphins appear to be awake during the day because they're swimming.

Half Of Brain Sleeps, Half Keeps Swimming

However, these animals' brains work in a special way. The dolphins sleep by resting only half of their brains at a time. The other half stays awake so that the dolphin can keep swimming and go to the surface to breathe. Even when they're gliding through the water, they may actually be sleeping.

Julian Tyne, a researcher at Australia's Murdoch University, studied spinner dolphins near the Big Island for three years. He said they were exposed to humans 80 percent of the time.

Often, people would come interact with the dolphins every 10 minutes, he said.

Tyne said he doesn't know whether this human interaction is changing dolphin behavior. But he said the animals may not be resting as much as they need to, which could be bad for them.

Tour Aims To "Observe Not Disturb"

The Marine Mammal Protection Act is a law that prohibits the harassment of dolphins. However, it's not clear whether swimming with them is allowed.

Jennifer Hall, a musician from Chicago, recently visited Hawaii. She went on a tour early in the morning with about 10 other people. The tour was near Honolulu, the capital city of Hawaii, on the island of Oahu.

They jumped in the water to see dolphins swim and dive down to the ocean floor about 20 to 25 feet below. Some tourists tried to follow the dolphins, but the guides stopped them and said they should "observe not disturb."

Their boat, together with about five other boats, made a big half-circle around the animals.

Hall said she felt the same peacefulness that the dolphins did from being in the water. Her partner Noam Wallenberg, a songwriter, said it was "vastly different" from seeing animals in a zoo.

"Being with creatures of the ocean right there and seeing them in their natural habitat was really wonderful. So beautiful," she said.

QUIZ

1. The author mainly explains the importance of protecting the dolphins by:

A. including the opinions of scientists and dolphin experts

- B. explaining dolphin's feeding behavior
- C. describing dolphin habitats in detail
- D. showing the effects of swimmers on dolphin health

2. What is MOST likely the reason why the author included the interview with Claudia Merrill?

- A. to show the point of view of those who oppose the regulations
- B. to show that some tour companies also want to protect the dolphins
- C. to show how caring many tour guides are to dolphins
- D. to show why regulations might not be necessary

3. Read this sentence from the section "Some Tours Let Dolphins Get Midday Rest."

Sometimes the dolphins appear to be awake during the day because they're swimming.

Which of these words helps you understand that tourists may not know when they are bothering the dolphins?

- A. Sometimes

B. Appear

C. Awake

D. Swimming

4. Read the paragraph from the article.

Merrill also said that tour guides must be taught to understand when dolphins want to rest. One big indication is when a pod of dolphins synchronizes their swims and dives so they move together.

Which phrase from the article is MOST helpful in understanding the meaning of the word “synchronizes”?

A. want to rest

B. pod of dolphins

C. move together

D. big indication

ANSWER KEY

1. A

2. B

3. B

4. C