

Dolphin dangers on rise in Brevard County's Indian River

Biologists installed educational placards along piers, docks, sea walls and boat ramps of the Indian River Lagoon, with the hope that people seeing them will stop feeding wild dolphins and safely recycle fishing line.



By **Kevin Spear**
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B iologists are gluing hundreds of placards to the tops of seawalls this week in Brevard and Volusia counties that caution anglers and boaters not to feed dolphins or discard fishing gear into their coastal environment.

“An entanglement [with fishing line] can act as a knife that can cut their appendages, their flippers, dorsal fin, their jaw,” said Megan Stolen, research scientist with Hubbs SeaWorld Research Institute.

The message isn't new but the technique is emerging, done first in Galveston, Texas, several years ago and more recently at Fort De Soto Park at the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico.

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An entanglement can act as a knife,

— Megan Stolen, Hubbs SeaWorld Research Institute.

The biologists are focused now on the Indian River Lagoon as a hot spot for illegal feeding of dolphins and an upward spike of those injured or killed by hooks or line.

About 60 dolphins are found dead annually in the 150-mile Indian River, killed by disease and undetermined causes. About 10 percent to 15 percent of those show injury from fishing gear, although it's not always certain that was the cause of death.

Of deaths specifically attributed to lines and hooks, there have been seven so far this year, which is as many or more than in all years but one during the past decade.

“This is the minimum we know about it,” Stolen said. “We don't find every dead or entangled dolphin.”

The suffering of a dolphin snared by line or suffocating from a tightening knot in its throat can be prolonged.

They can become entangled in line attached to a heavy object, such a crab trap, that can't be moved without great exertion.

"They are essentially anchored in place so that those entanglements can lead to drowning," Stolen said.

Less visible but as lethal is a noose of line that can form in their throats because of their anatomy.

Dolphins have a larynx or windpipe that passes through the middle of their esophagus; when a dolphin swallows a fish, it has to pass on one side or the other of the larynx to get to the stomach.

If the fish is attached to line or a hook, it can get stuck in a dolphin's throat.

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This causes them to choke to death.

— Megan Stolen, describing what happens when fishing line severs a dolphin's larynx.

"The dolphin will regurgitate the fish and the line. It will come back up. Then they will swallow it again. It will come back up. Then they will swallow it again," said Stolen, describing how line wraps repeatedly around the larynx. This causes them to choke to death.

Or it can sever the larynx so that a dolphin is breathing food.

"That is always fatal," Stolen said.

Several dolphins suffering from entanglement are rescued each year, a number that is trending up with the advent of cell phones and people willing report dolphins in distress.

The conservationists think their method of affixing placards to seawalls will be effective because the message won't have to compete with the thicket of signs that often great sightseers, anglers, beachgoers and boaters at coastal parks.

At Brevard County's Kelly Park, a popular waterfront at the Banana River section of the Indian River, signs address manatees, seagrass, sea turtles, safe boating, warnings not to tamper with crab traps, details about the lagoon and the Coast Guard's Waterway Watch.

"We chose these placards because over the years natural areas such as this are getting cluttered with a lot of metal signs," Cheryl Munday of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, adding that visitors may miss the messages amid the overkill. "When they see this many signs, they might not always stop to read them."

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— Cheryl Munday, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Munday said when dolphins are fed, they lose their fear of people and rely on handouts, or will hang around shorelines and boats where people are fishing, stealing bait and hooked fish.

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We always say a fed dolphin is a dead dolphin.

— Cheryl Munday

"We always say a fed dolphin is a dead dolphin," Munday said, echoing a phrase used with other wildlife.

As video surfaced on social media last month showing a shark being dragged behind a boat, dolphins also have been the target of malicious treatment.

But the vast majority of resident and visitors are in awe of dolphins, say the biologists, and may need a just nudge of education for how to behave around the marine mammals.

"Dolphins are long-lived, they have large brains, they stay in social groups and have complex interactions, and in many ways they are similar to primates: chimpanzees; gorillas; and humans," Stolen said. "In general, people feel that dolphins are smart, curious and aware creatures."

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— Megan Stolen.

Katie Orcutt, 27, a Brevard native who fishes and surfs often, said she noticed the placards immediately and thought they were a good idea.

“A lot of people who come to the water love dolphins but don’t know that fishing line or feeding them can be a problem.”

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