

## Contact information:

NOAA Fisheries  
Southeast Regional Office  
Protected Resources Division  
263 13th Avenue S  
St. Petersburg, Florida 33701  
(727) 824-5312

[www.fisheries.noaa.gov](http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov)

To report dead, injured or entangled dolphins, whales, seals or sea turtles in the Southeast U.S., Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands to:

**1-877-WHALE HELP  
(1-877-942-5343)**

Report right whale sightings in the Southeast U.S. to:

**1-877-942-5343  
or U.S. Coast Guard  
Channel 16**

To report potential violation of the Endangered Species Act or Marine Mammal Protection Act, contact NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement:



**1-800-853-1964**



# NOAA FISHERIES

## Southeast U.S. Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Viewing Guidelines



Photo credit: FWC taken under NOAA permit # 15468 issued to GADNR



## Why is it important to follow these guidelines?

Marine mammals and sea turtles share our coastal waters, including bays, sounds, and estuaries. This means, people can easily enjoy viewing them in the wild, but it also puts them at risk of human-caused injuries or death. These threats include entanglement in recreational or commercial fishing gear, becoming entangled in or ingesting marine debris, being illegally fed, being struck by boat propellers, or being harassed. When animals are harassed or disturbed, it affects their ability to feed, rest, nurse their young (marine mammals), or reproduce. For these and others reasons, marine mammals and sea turtles are protected by federal law.

### Endangered Species Act (ESA)

The **Endangered Species Act (ESA)** prohibits the "take" of endangered or threatened sea turtles or marine mammals in U.S. waters and the high seas. **Take** is defined as "to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture -or collect, or attempt to engage in any such activity." **Harm** is further defined as any act that actually kills or injures fish or wildlife. This can include the destruction or modification of habitat that significantly impairs breeding, spawning, migrating, feeding, or sheltering which ultimately results in the death of an animal. Violating the ESA may result in civil penalties up to \$32,500 or criminal penalties up to \$100,000 plus up to one year of imprisonment.

### Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA)

The **Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA)** prohibits the "take" of all marine mammal species in U.S. waters. **Take** is defined as "to harass, hunt, capture, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, kill, or feed any marine mammal." **Harassment** is defined in the MMPA as "any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance which has the potential to injure a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild; or has the potential to disturb a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild by causing disruption of behavioral patterns, including, but not limited to, migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, or sheltering." Violating the MMPA may result in civil penalties up to \$11,000 or criminal penalties up to \$100,000 plus one year imprisonment.

### Why is feeding marine mammals harmful and illegal?

The MMPA also prohibits feeding marine mammals in the wild. Marine mammals that are fed lose their natural fear of humans and also become dependent on humans for handouts; this puts them at risk of becoming entangled in fishing gear or being struck by boats. They also teach these behaviors to their young, putting them at risk as well. Marine mammals, like all wild animals, may bite and inflict injuries to people who try to feed them.

# Follow these guidelines to prevent harassment and injury to marine mammals or sea turtles in the wild:

1. The minimum recommended viewing distances are:

**Dolphins = 50 yards** (1/2 the length of a football field)

**Whales = 100 yards** (the length of a football field)

Breaching whales may put people and/or vessels in danger.

**North Atlantic right whales = 500 yards**

Federal law prohibits approaching or remaining within 500 yards of North Atlantic right whales.

**Seals = 50 yards**

Keep pets on a leash and away from seals for their safety.

**Sea turtles = 50 yards**

2. **Never feed or attempt to feed marine mammals or sea turtles – it's prohibited by Federal law and it kills.**

For more information visit: [www.dontfeedwilddolphins.org](http://www.dontfeedwilddolphins.org)

3. **Do not swim with, ride, pet, touch, or attempt to interact with marine mammals or sea turtles in the wild.**



## Stay alert and use caution!

4. **Limit your viewing time to 30 minutes or less.**

Prolonged exposure to one or more vessels increases the likelihood that marine mammals and sea turtles will be disturbed.

5. **Avoid approaching the animals when another vessel is near.**

When several vessels are in an area, communication between vessels will help ensure that you do not cause the animals to be disturbed by corraling.

6. **Never pursue or follow marine wildlife.**

Any vessel movement should be from the recommended distance and slightly parallel to or from the rear of the animal. If you need to move around marine wildlife, do so from behind; never approach head-on.

Pursuit of sea turtles, and pursuit, torment, or annoyance of marine mammals that has the potential to disturb or disrupt natural behaviors is prohibited by Federal law.

SMARTPHONE APP: (for iPhone & Android devices)  
Download **SEE & ID Dolphins & Whales** for tips on how to view marine mammals in the wild and a species ID guide of marine mammals in the Southeast U.S.



7. **If approached by a marine mammal or sea turtle, put your vessel's engine in neutral; allow the animal to pass and move away slowly.**

Be aware that these animals may surface in unpredictable locations.

8. **Marine mammals and sea turtles should not be encircled or trapped between vessels, or a vessel and the shore.**

Never attempt to herd, chase, or separate groups of marine mammals or females from their young. Always leave animals an "escape route."

9. **Avoid excessive vessel speed or sudden changes in speed or direction, and do not operate or maneuver a vessel in a way that may change the animal's behaviors.**

Specifically, do not intentionally direct your vessel or accelerate toward a marine mammal with the intent of creating a pressure wake allowing them to bow or wake-ride. Vessel strikes can cause fatal injuries to marine mammals and sea turtles.

## Travel in a predictable manner!



## Limit viewing time!

10. **Avoid excessive noise.**

Marine mammals have sensitive hearing and many species communicate by vocalizing underwater. Underwater sound produced by revving a vessel's engine and banging on a vessel to solicit the animal's attention has the potential to disturb them.

11. **Slowly leave the area if marine mammals show signs of disturbance.**

These include strongly exhaling, tail-slapping, breaching, repeated avoidance behaviors, erratic changes in speed or direction, increased aerial behaviors, or lengthy periods underwater.

12. **Report dead, injured or entangled dolphins, whales or sea turtles in the Southeast U.S. to: 1-877-WHALE HELP (1-877-942-5343).**

SMARTPHONE APP: (for iPhone & Android devices)  
Download **Dolphin & Whale 911** to learn how to help stranded marine mammals and to connect to the nearest stranding response organization.



## Remain a respectful distance!

