

**i). Swimming with dolphins – an evolving art. The development and implementation of a dolphin swim code of conduct in Mozambique.** Angie Gullan, with contributions from Diana Rocha, Sharyn West, Almeida Guissamulo and Mitchel Niemeyer, Dolphin Encountours/Dolphincare-Africa, Mozambique.

### **Developing a dolphin friendly swim programme and code of conduct**

The objective of our swim programme was to create a safe space for humans and dolphins to interact. This was made possible once the DolphinCare Code of Conduct was developed. The rules were set and it was hoped that with time, a trusting relationship would be formed with the resident dolphins. As time continued to pass, our knowledge expanded and we became better able to understand and distinguish between various behaviours. This helped inform development of The Code and our swim programme. Some behaviours, for example, would indicate we should avoid a group of dolphins. Tail slaps and loud chuffing signal to us that we are not welcome and fast, direct, mock-charging in the water, indicates 'get out now'. A strict no-touch, no-dive and no-chase policy incorporated into The Code, ensured that dolphins would have right of way and could either choose to engage, or ignore those people watching.

Observing dolphin behaviour prior to in-water encounters is a vital aspect of the Code of Conduct, as this not only allows us time to gauge the dolphins mood, but also gives them time to adjust to the boat being in their space. During this time data is collected and photography undertaken as part of the identification project we support.

The DolphinCare Code of Conduct has evolved over the years and will no doubt continue to change as tourism and development in the area increases. We are grateful that other local operators are following not only the standard Marine Mammal Code of Conduct, set out within the PPMR Management Plan (a fairly standard code for recreational and commercial craft), but also the DolphinCare Code of Conduct, developed specifically for swim-with encounters.

### **The DolphinCare Code of Conduct**

Prior to all encounters, participants receive a full briefing to ensure safety procedures are understood and to minimise stress to the dolphins. We feel that if participants are better able to understand wild dolphin behaviours and can perceive them as intelligent beings, almost like people, they are better able to relate to and respect them. All encounters are led by on-site guides and researchers who have a long-term relationship with the dolphins. Participants do not enter the water on their own without guides. No more than twelve participants are taken on each trip and in-water participants are governed by the dolphins' behaviour and under the guide's discretion. Depending on dolphin behaviour, swims are between one to twenty minutes in length.

### **Water entry**

Launching takes place off a semi-rigid dive boat. This has no ladders, so entry into/out of the water takes place over pontoons. We ask guests to slip in over the pontoons quietly and gently when getting into the water. No backward scuba rolls or dives! The aim is to be as quiet as possible, so as not to scare the dolphins away.

Dolphins orientate their world through sound. Loud crashing and aggressive movements will only result in them moving away. Customers are dropped ahead and to the side of an approaching pod, giving them time to relax and wait.

### **Swim postures**

Once in the water, participants are requested to float and wait for the dolphins to approach. They are told to keep their arms by their sides or behind their backs and to move slowly and calmly, causing as little turbulence as possible. Feet should also be kept under the surface of the water when finning.

Dolphins use echo-location to gain information about their surroundings - when people are in the water it is no different. The distinctive click of the echoes can be heard when the pod is approaching. Flailing and groping limbs send back a fuzzy picture, resulting in dolphins preferring to avoid the area.

One of three things will happen when in the water:

- Dolphins will move through the group of people.
- Dolphins will approach and engage with guides and people.
- Dolphins will avoid the group of people resulting in no in-water sightings.

## **In-water Code of Conduct**

- a) Once in the water stay in a group and follow your guide/researcher. Guides have been specially trained to recognise certain individuals that are likely to engage and are also able to read visual signals from the dolphins. On occasion, dolphins will signal their reluctance to engage and it is the guide's job to recognise and act on these behaviours, some of which include mock charges, a show of teeth and S-posturing. It is thought that the use of visual signals by cetaceans is an important mode of close range communication; and it is likely that they attempt these methods of communication with humans. Acoustic signals are also taken into account. Generally the more sociable the pod the more vocalising can be heard.
- b) Wait quietly for the dolphins to approach you. It is up to the dolphins whether they want to interact. Participants are instructed to wait rather than pursue.
- c) Do not swim frantically towards the dolphins or after them. Direct head to head swimming accompanied by an open jaw, is, in dolphin terms, a sign of aggression. Once dolphins move off, participants are asked not to pursue them - if they want to return to interact, they will, and often do.
- d) Do not swim directly on top of dolphins. Swimming directly above a dolphin can hinder its ability to breathe.
- e) Under no circumstances touch dolphins. There is a strict no-touch rule. This is both as a sign of respect and to minimise any health risks. Dolphin skin is very sensitive and contact could transfer disease or bacteria.
- f) The use of underwater scooters is not permitted. These are prohibited in the PPMR.
- g) The use of underwater camera flash is not permitted. Participants are instructed to disable any flash that might go off in the water - previous experience indicates this can startle dolphins.
- h) No diving down. In order to minimise stress for the animals, Dolphin Encountours took the decision to introduce a no-dive policy in 2009. We had noticed that as more people took to the water, the dolphins were spending less time in our company. Preventing customers from diving down creates a safe space for dolphins to pass under the groups of swimmers above. The only diving permitted is by researchers who need to dive to record certain behaviours.
- i) No swimming with newborns. The researcher or guide should enter the water in order to assess the status of individuals and the pod. Operators are not permitted to allow in-water encounters with pods that have calves of less than 30 days old, as this time is important for bonding and there are also heightened risks of predation. If a group splits from the mothers and newborns, interaction can be forthcoming and participants are allowed to enter the water. But every effort should be made not to separate or disturb mothers and neonates.
- j) If dolphins are displaying aggressive social/sexual behaviour, water entry is prohibited. During these times viewing is undertaken from the boat rather than in the water, for safety reasons. This behaviour is often characterised by tail slaps, butting and general aggression towards other dolphins and humans who risk getting in the way.

## **Summary**

Inevitably the quality of dolphin interactions has declined slightly over the years, due to the increase in vessel activity (fishing/diving boats and jet-skis) and growth in the number of dolphin swim operators. However, it is likely that development of the DolphinCare Code of Conduct has significantly slowed this decline and should result in the industry being able to continue, despite its rapid and previously unsustainable growth.

Through enabling long term monitoring of a single pod of dolphins, Dolphin Encountours in support of DolphinCare-Africa has also illustrated how swim-with programmes can be used to generate data to expand scientific knowledge and inform the development and improvement of codes of conduct governing interaction with these wonderful animals.

References 1. Würsig, B., Kieckhefer, T.R., & Jefferson, T.A. 1990. Visual Displays for Communication in Cetaceans. In *Sensory Abilities of Cetaceans* (J. Thomas and R. Kastelein, eds.), Plenum Press, New York, p. 545-559.