An update on the Dolphin Space Programme training and accreditation scheme for wildlife tour boat operators in the Moray Firth, Scotland.

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Abstract

Provided here is a summary of progress made by the Dolphin Space Programme (DSP) training and accreditation scheme for wildlife tour operators in the Moray Firth, Scotland. In May 2005 a new DSP project officer was employed with support from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS). Since then the DSP scheme has been reviewed and a number of significant changes and improvements made. These include increasing the benefits of membership for tour operators; leading to increased support for the scheme, development of a new DSP website (www.dolphinspace.org), regular meetings and workshops between DSP operators and steering group members, collaboration with the national WiSe (www.wisescheme.org) accreditation scheme to offer increased training and marketing opportunities for DSP members, development of new interpretation materials for DSP boats and training in interpretive and guiding skills, increased marketing and promotion of the DSP scheme and input into the new Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code (SMWWC). In addition, a new research project is planned for summer 2007 to investigate how successful the DSP is currently in protecting marine wildlife from disturbance due to tourism activities. SNH and WDCS have recently awarded the DSP further funding which will support the running costs of the DSP and project officer salary for a further two years.

Introduction

The Dolphin Space Programme (DSP) is an accreditation scheme for wildlife tour boat operators in the Moray Firth, Scotland. Launched on World Oceans Day, 8 June 1995, the aim of the DSP is to encourage wildlife cruise operators and the public who go out to observe dolphins and other marine wildlife to "watch how they watch" and respect the animal's need for space.

The mission of the Dolphin Space Programme (DSP) is to be a model of excellence in responsible wildlife tourism and to support the sustainable, positive development of marine wildlife watching in the Moray Firth, Scotland. The DSP aims to achieve this mission through these complementary objectives:

- Reducing the potential impact that cetacean-watching boats can have on the status, distribution or behaviour of the Moray Firth bottlenose dolphins;
- Raising awareness and encouraging conservation of marine wildlife through provision of high quality training, education and interpretation to DSP members and to the public;
- Encouraging collaboration between wildlife tour operators, management agencies, conservation organisations, members of the public and other water users, including recreational boats and shore-based wildlife watchers;
- Encouraging long-term ecological and economical sustainability of marine wildlife tourism in the Moray Firth

Why do we need guidelines for dolphin watching in the Moray Firth?

Wildlife watching provides valuable income for local communities, as well as providing an ideal opportunity to raise awareness and inform people about the marine environment. However, without appropriate management, cetacean watching from boats can cause disturbance and potentially have longer term impacts on the distribution and health of cetacean populations (e.g. Bejder & Samuels 2003, Bejder 2005).

Bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) are a wide spread and relatively common species worldwide. This species occurs in several places throughout Europe, however their distribution is thought to have contracted during the last century and they are no longer considered to be common in European waters. The north east Scottish population of bottlenose dolphins, previously known as the Moray Firth population, is the only population of bottlenose dolphins in the North Sea. This is also the most northerly population of this species in the world. Models developed by Aberdeen University suggest that there are only approximately 130 individuals in this population. Due to its small size and isolation, this population is considered to be particularly vulnerable.

Research carried out in other parts of the world, where boat-based cetacean watching has been carried out for many years, indicates that cetaceans can show a negative response to the noise and behaviour of tour boats (see review in Samuels & Bejder 2003). The potential effects of disturbance on cetaceans from boats can be broadly divided into three categories. These are:

1. Immediate effects arising from boat/cetacean collisions
2. Short-term effects which include interruption or changes in essential behaviours such as respiration, feeding, resting, socialising, communicating, care of young and group spacing. Repeated disturbance of these behaviours can result in chronic stress and increased use of energy.
3. Long-term effects which can result in changes in distribution, reduced fitness and reduced breeding potential.

To avoid these potential impacts the Dolphin Space Programme provides a code of conduct for interacting with cetaceans (see appendix 1), training opportunities and educational materials to encourage wildlife tour operators to have responsible interactions with cetaceans. In return for joining the scheme tour operators are offered support and marketing opportunities by the members of the DSP steering group. This group is made up of representatives from VisitScotland, the Wildlife Tour Boat Operators' Society, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, the Northern

Constabulary, Grampian Police, The Highland Council, Inverness Harbour Trust, the Maritime Coastguard Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage.

The Dolphin Space Programme pre-2005

In 2003 Garrod & Fennel suggested that the Dolphin Space Programme scheme had collapsed, primarily due to a lack of stakeholder involvement. In a paper presented to the International Whaling Commission, Simmonds *et al.* (2004), suggest that although this statement may have been a little premature, the Dolphin Space Programme had achieved less that might have been hoped for. Simmonds *et al.* (2004) propose that this situation may have been largely due to the lack of a dedicated DSP project officer who could provide support for accredited operators and conduct independent monitoring of the scheme.

In May 2005, with grant support from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS), a part-time DSP project officer was employed. The initial contract of employment was for two years, working three days a week. The key aim of this post was to develop the Dolphin Space Programme and take forward an ambitious programme of work in partnership with conservation and development agencies in the Moray Firth, plus key commercial operators. This was to be achieved through a range of activities, including the promotion of the scheme (to the public and to operators), encouraging accreditation of new operators, ensuring greater support for existing operators & monitoring the effectiveness of the scheme.

When the new project officer came into post in May 2005, some improvements had already been made within the DSP – mainly due to the hard work of key people on the DSP steering group. All the tour operators in the Moray Firth had signed up to the DSP for that year, the operators had also organised their own representative body called the 'Wildlife Tour Boat Operators Society' and had two members of this society on the DSP steering group. More regular meetings of the steering group and DSP members were

being held and a review of the DSP code of conduct was underway, with suggestions for improvements being made by some of the accredited operators.

Summary of progress made since May 2005

Stakeholder Involvement & Communication

Once in post the project officer met individually with all accredited tour operators and with the majority of steering group members. These meetings were used to assess current satisfaction with the DSP and to gather suggestions for its ongoing improvement and development. Since then twice yearly meetings have been organised, in the spring and autumn, to update tour operators and steering group members about DSP progress, solicit input and feedback and provide training and dissemination of any new information relevant to marine wildlife watching. New steering group members have been invited to join the DSP, including local police wildlife liaison officers and a new VisitScotland representative and the relationship and trust between the DSP, agencies and tour operators has been significantly improved. The excerpt from an email below demonstrates the improvement in relations between the DSP and an operator who was originally quite dissatisfied with the scheme.

' I know we may not have seen eye to eye last year but through talking I have learnt that we are both on the same side and at the end of the day the most important issue is the conservation of the dolphins and all the other wildlife surrounding the Moray Firth, so I for one will try and help you in your efforts to continue this goal'

Education & Interpretation

The quantity and quality of interpretive resources on DSP accredited boats was very variable in 2005, with some boats offering little or no interpretation resources or commentary and others offering a great deal. Since then the interpretive resources have been assessed and operators consulted about how they would like to improve these resources. A grant from the Moray Firth Partnership was used to develop new interpretation materials in the form of a waterproof folder containing information about

the Moray Firth area and wildlife. Further grants are being applied for to continue the development of interpretive resources and the DSP is also working with WDCS to provide trained guides for DSP accredited boats (see below).

Training

In previous years the DSP only provided training and guidance on how to approach and interact with cetaceans. Recognising that a wider variety of wildlife can be affected by wildlife tourism, the DSP has collaborated with the WiSe scheme (www.wisescheme.org) to provide free training for all DSP operators in how to safely approach and interact with a larger variety of marine wildlife, including; seals, seabirds, basking sharks and turtles; as well as cetaceans. This course was very well received by DSP operators and since then the project officer has provided some of the cetacean training aspects of WiSe courses offered in other areas of Scotland, thereby strengthening the link between these two schemes.

Over the last 18 months the DSP project officer has been working in collaboration with WDCS to research and develop a training course for marine tour guides. The DSP hopes to encourage and support more tour operators to use onboard guides as we believe that trained guides can significantly improve the quality of interpretation on whale watching boats, thereby improving their educational and conservation value. To work toward this aim WDCS and the DSP have recently offered a free two day training course in interpretation and guiding skills to WDCS volunteers, tour operators and guides on DSP tour boats. The course was a big success and more courses are planned. Workshops to continue the development of this training programme are also scheduled to take place at the European Cetacean Society conference in Spain (April 2007) and at the Coastal and Marine Tourism congress in Auckland (September 2007).

Monitoring and Compliance

The issue of compliance monitoring has been discussed with the operators and steering group and improved monitoring procedures have been employed. In the past operators had complained that the monitoring was conducted by people who were inexperienced in

assessing boat handling around wildlife and who were not objective due to their close connections to DSP steering group members. Operators were also unhappy that they did not receive any feedback from the monitoring process. To improve this situation the monitoring is now conducted by an objective outsider who is contracted for several weeks each year to go out anonymously on all the DSP accredited boats and assess compliance with the scheme. Operators are then offered feedback soon after their trip to ensure that this process is as open, honest and useful to them as possible.

DSP Code and Policy Review

The DSP code of conduct has been reviewed and updated to meet the needs of existing and new tour operators whilst ensuring that dolphins and sensitive areas for dolphins are protected. This is an ongoing and flexible process which will continue from year to year to ensure that the DSP remains an example of best practice. The DSP complaints and accreditation procedures have been reviewed following feedback and discussions with operators and steering group members and new procedures have been drawn up. The accreditation agreement now asks operators to support the aims of the DSP and its steering group members and to work in collaboration with the entire group, following DSP procedures should any issues or complaints arise. This will ensure that any issues within the group are dealt with in a fair, timely and proper way.

Promotion and Marketing

Until recently many of the DSP operators felt that being a member of the DSP did not provide them with any significant benefits and therefore many were apathetic about the scheme. It was felt that support for and compliance with the DSP scheme could be significantly improved if operators felt there were more obvious benefits to membership. The main benefit operators asked for was assistance with promotion and marketing. To meet this request the DSP has launched a series of actions to increase public awareness of the DSP and to promote DSP accredited operators. This includes liaising with local radio, newspapers and BBC Scotland to raise the profile of the DSP and of responsible wildlife watching in general. Regular updates and articles regarding the DSP have been featured in the Moray Firth Partnership "Dolphin Echo" newsletter. A new dedicated DSP website

has been developed which has details about the DSP and wildlife watching in the Moray Firth and links to DSP accredited operators and the steering group. The site also has news and events pages, a library of papers and useful documents, a forum for DSP members to discuss ideas and issue and a project officer blog. The DSP brand has been improved by redesigning the logo to give it a fresher and more modern look. The new logo features graphics of a boat and mountains to give a clearer message regarding the aims of the DSP, which were not clear from the old logo. New leaflets and posters have been developed and the DSP has joined VisitScotland; paying to have DSP promotional materials in all 24 Tourism Information Centres across the Highlands and Aberdeenshire. The project officer has been working in close collaboration with VisitScotland's public relations department and this has led to a press visit being scheduled for April 19th 2007. Several national newspaper journalists are expected to attend the press visit and will be taken on cruise with a DSP accredited tour boat and then taken to the WDCS wildlife centre. It is hoped that this will result ins several features on the DSP and responsible wildlife watching in the Moray Firth in national newspapers.

Research

The DSP has kept abreast of relevant research which informs our understanding of dolphin/vessel interactions and management of wildlife tourism. The project officer has attended various meetings and conferences and has organised an informal workshop on the development and management of codes of conduct at the Society for Marine Mammalogy biennial conference, in San Diego, December 2005. In addition to this the DSP worked in collaboration with two MSc researchers in 2006. This included an Ecotourism MSc researcher from the University of Portsmouth who investigated wildlife watchers attitudes toward education and interpretation on wildlife watching cruises. The report generated by this project was used in the development of new educational resources and interpretation for boats as well the naturalist training programme. Secondly, the DSP collaborated with a Conservation MSc student from University College London to investigate distribution of cetaceans in the outer Moray Firth. The data generated by this project has been useful in a preliminary identification of areas in the outer firth which may be of particular importance to cetaceans. The recording forms used

during this project will be continued to be used to collect sighting data by operators and will allow a clearer picture of cetacean distribution to be built up over the years.

A new research project is planned for summer 2007 which will assess the success of the DSP in meeting its aims, i.e. reducing disturbance to dolphins and other marine wildlife whilst supporting the development of responsible, sustainable wildlife tourism. This project will also assess satisfaction with the DSP from operators, steering group and look at visitor satisfaction with wildlife watching cruises. The data generated will be used to further improve the DSP and help tour operators to continue improving their product. Stephen Westcote, an expert on disturbance and a trainer with the WiSe scheme has been contracted to undertake this research.

During spring 2007 the DSP will also be collaborating with Claire Kelly, a PhD researcher from the University of Plymouth who will be investigating the effectiveness of partnerships in delivering and influencing policy within the context of the marine nature-based tourism sector.

Consultancy

The DSP has taken part in meetings and discussions regarding the new Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code and has had a meaningful input into the development of this code. In addition, the project officer has been asked to be an expert witness in a current court case; the defendant is accused of operating a jet-ski recklessly around dolphins. This case in due to go to trial in June 2007. Recently the project officer has been invited to Iceland to collaborate with a research group in the development of a new project called 'Wild North' looking at impacts of tourism on wildlife in the North Atlantic and development of sustainable tourism practices and high quality interpretation.

Conclusions

Over the last two years the Dolphin Space Programme has undergone significant changes and development. Communication and trust between stakeholders has increased, new training opportunities have been offered to DSP members, interpretation on tour boats has been improved, policies have been reviewed and updated, a new promotional campaign launched and the benefits of being a DSP member expanded. This has led to improved functioning of the scheme and increased support from wildlife tour operators. The DSP continues to work closely with schemes such as WiSe and with researchers around the world to ensure that the DSP is once again an example of best practice in responsible, sustainable marine wildlife tourism. The success of the DSP has recently been recognised by the award of a further grant from Scottish Natural Heritage and the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society to support the running costs of the DSP for a further two years and the expansion of the project officer role into a full-time post.

For more information about the Dolphin Space Programme please visit our website at www.dolphinspace.org, or contact the DSP Project Officer (by post; PO Box 5890, Forres, IV36 1WY, by telephone; 07921 106144, or by email; deborah.benham@wdcs.org).

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