

## Summary of DSP Research Project 2007

### 1.0 Methods

Principle investigator – Stephen Westcott

#### 1.1 Data collection methods

- Interviews with DSP accredited wildlife cruise operators
- Land based wildlife watches
- Boat based observations of interactions between marine wildlife and tour vessels
- Passenger questionnaires (not completed/no data in report)

### 2.0 Summary of Results

#### 2.1 Interviews

- Interviews were conducted with nine DSP accredited tour operators, three steering group members and two others from interested groups (e.g. Wild Scotland, Friends of the Moray Firth Dolphins)
- Operators were mostly content with the DSP code of conduct except where it is seen to be overly strict e.g. in regard to areas/routes/sensitive areas.
- All operators would behave in a responsible way regardless of being members of the DSP.
- Felt that the Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code superseded the DSP. (Project officer note: Local codes are part of the SMWWC and are recognised as an important way to avoid cumulative impacts in areas where there are sensitive species and a boat based wildlife tourism industry. In addition, the DSP is an important management tool in meeting SNH's SAC requirements in the Moray Firth. As the dolphin's are the main reason for the Moray Firth SAC, SNH are required to provide protection for them throughout their range. The DSP is one way in which this is done and therefore is the main code of conduct in areas used by this population of dolphins).
- Too much hype about 'dolphin-watching' – (Project officer note: the DSP does not encourage wildlife tour operators to promote 'dolphin watching' specifically, nor does it specifically promote dolphin watching in DSP publicity materials. We have always encouraged people to promote 'wildlife watching' and not to raise expectations of seeing dolphins. The DSP has the word 'dolphin' in its name because it was developed to protect this small, isolated and vulnerable population of dolphins which are rare in a European context. As part of the management used to protect this population it is important that we raise awareness about their existence and how to behave responsibly around them. However, all our literature also promotes all the wonderful wildlife in the Moray Firth and promotes wildlife watching rather than dolphin watching specifically. If it is felt that the DSP publicity material is raising expectations unrealistically we can change these materials. I am happy to discuss this more with the rest of the group)
- DSP much better managed than it was when no project officer in place.
- Some alienation still felt due to past issues and lack of benefits of being a member in the past.
- Interviews with other members of the DSP group were not summarised in this report. I have asked Stephen to add this information to the next draft of the report.

## Summary of tour operator responses to interviews

Question	Yes	No	Neutral	No reply
Is the DSP working for you generally?	3	2	4	0
Has it improved over the past two years?	5	3	0	1
Is the code of conduct working for you?	4	1	3	1
Would like more help with marketing?	8	1	0	0
Would like more wildlife handouts?	6	3	0	0
Dislike over-emphasis on 'dolphins'	9	0	0	0
Concerned at range-constraints on personal operations	6	0	0	3
Concern at potential arrival of new operators	3	0	0	6
Would behave no differently if were not members of	9	0	0	0

### 2.2 Wildlife Observations

- Five land based watches were made to become acquainted with the sites and wildlife. Dolphins were observed once at Chanonry Point, seals observed at Whiteness and Portgordon and birds observed at the Sutors and Troupe Head. No interactions between wildlife and tour boat were witnessed.
- 15 wildlife cruises were taken with seven DSP accredited boat operators. For two operators only one trip was taken, for three operators, two trips were taken. Three trips were taken with one operator and four trips with another. In total, five trips were taken with inner firth operators and ten trips with outer firth operators.
- Bottlenose dolphins were seen on six trips, with four different operators. On five of these trips the group was accompanied by a calf. Harbour porpoises were seen on two trips, with two different operators, a minke whale was seen once, seals were seen on six trips with four different operators, Seabirds were seen on most trips but only in nesting colonies with five of the seven operators.
- There were no observations of disturbed or avoidance behaviour from dolphins or other cetaceans. On two occasions several seals were disturbed into the water from haul-out sites, but as the boat in question approached very slowly and remained at a good distance away, it is not clear what else the operator could have done to avoid this. It has been noted that the seals in this area tend to become more habituated throughout the season and this was early in the season. Later in the season the seals in this location did not react to the same kind of approach by this vessel. In a few instances birds rafting on the water swam or flew away as vessels approached, but no vessels drove directly through rafts of seabirds.

### 3.0 Recommendations

#### 3.1 Help put more 'bums on seats' – Marketing and Promotion

- Broadcast attractions of the Moray Firth area and the wildlife that can be seen to wider market, including rest of UK and international market.
- Invite travel representatives, journalists and other media reps to area to take a boat trip and 'launch' this area as a wildlife destination.
- Compile a library of still and video images with local backdrops to distribute to visiting media in case they cannot capture the images themselves.
- Look into the 'buy a gift' scheme or initiate some other type of voucher scheme.
- Link to the Adopt – a – Dolphin scheme somehow to the mutual benefit of tour operators and WDCS.

- Don't market the area as a dolphin watching area, but as a general wildlife watching area.

### 3.2 Code of Conduct

- "If it 'aint broke, don't fix it" -- code mostly working well for the operators.
- Get rid of designated operator areas in outer firth (PO note: this was trialled last year and seemed to work fine so no reason not to continue with this approach).
- Re-visit issue of restrictions on visiting Chanonry Point or provide evidence of why this area is so sensitive (PO note: see below).
- Provide evidence for designation of other sensitive areas or get rid of them (PO note: There is evidence for Chanonry Point, the Sutons, Beaully Firth and Spey Bay for dolphins and Troupe Head area for seabirds. I am happy to get rid of any other sensitive areas that are currently marked on operator maps. I can pass on journal papers &/or research data with evidence for these sites if people want them.)
- Allow overlap in inner firth (Project officer note: the operator areas in the inner MF already overlap).
- Conduct research study of bottlenose dolphin behaviour in relation to 'sensitive' areas and in relation to boat traffic (PO note: Not something the DSP has the resources to do, however David Lusseau from Aberdeen University is planning to do something like this).

### 3.3 Education/Interpretation

- Produce a leaflet similar to RSPB Troupe Head leaflet with common species and information about them and also explaining work of DSP and role of operators in making it work.

### 3.4 Communication

- More direct communication with project officer and less emails.
- More face to face meetings.
- Listen to the operators more.
- Less jargon and 'management/agency speak'.

### 3.5 WDCS Wildlife Centre Marketing

- Was considered very unreasonable and caused a lot of bad feeling -- tour operators would like a proper explanation.

PO notes:

- I will provide an explanation at the meeting and explain how the issue was resolved. I would should note that the DSP and the wildlife centre staff were also distressed about this decision and worked closely with head office to come to a resolution. Operators are now encouraged to send their leaflets to the DSP project officer or direct to the wildlife centre for display in the DSP leaflet racks at both WDCS centres (Spey Bay and North Kessock).

### 3.6 New Operators

- Discuss what should happen when new operators start up -- should they be allowed to join the DSP, or should the DSP be 'loyal' to existing operators?

PO notes:

- If new operators were excluded they would not be following the same guidelines as everyone else and could spend time in areas that others have agreed not to spend time in.
- The whole group would miss the benefits of working in partnership with other local operators.
- The DSP has no way of stopping new operators from setting up and operating -- surely its better to work with them in partnership and cooperation rather than excluding them and potentially causing more tension and rivalry?

- There are also issues of the legality of excluding new operators from a voluntary code of conduct/voluntary partnership that has marketing benefits. Exclusion may go against anti-competition laws.
- However, the DSP does recognise the danger of too many operators on economic and environmental sustainability. Therefore we will be working with researchers to look at long term solutions. In the future there may be binding limits/restrictions on licenses but if people want this they need to get involved in lobbying for it.

### **3.7 Recreational Craft - Raising Public Awareness & Additional Monitoring**

- Provide more information to the general public and in particular private boaters.
- Project officer should take local initiative for the Moray Firth (PO note: I have approached SNH and they are happy for me to do this – we are going to produce a leaflet for the Moray Firth with species info and SMWWC code information. Collaboration between SNH, DSP and WDCS).
- Lobby SNH to do more in terms of raising awareness (PO note: in progress).
- Make SMWWC leaflets more useful/essential by adding a tide table or species ID info so people keep them and refer to them (PO note: I have advised SNH and will make sure this is the case for any leaflets we produce on the SMWWC).
- Make copies of DSP code available at harbours, slipways, coastguard etc (PO note: this may not be a good idea if we will be promoting the SMWWC – it may be better to stick to publicising one code for recreational vessel users to avoid confusion).
- Look into idea of police launch or coastal patrol of some kind. Particularly during evenings and weekends when harbour masters are not available. DSP should lobby for this. (PO note: This might happen due to the Whiteness development and marine mapping exercise – SNH can tell us more about this.)
- Lobby for variable speed limit for recreational and industrial vessel traffic in inner Moray Firth.

### **3.8 Coastal & Offshore Development**

- Investigate these developments and what is being done to protect dolphins and mitigate against them (PO note: sent out summary and SNH mitigation and actions earlier this year).
- Share info about these developments and projects with operators

PO notes:

- WDCS are launching a Moray Firth campaign this year called ‘Protect our Dolphins’ due to concerns about these developments. Anyone who wants to get involved with this campaign and help raise public awareness would be welcomed by WDCS. New developments will be available on the WDCS website.

### **3.9 Pre-Season Update**

- Operators would like the most up to date research findings about the bottlenose dolphin population and other marine wildlife to be shared with them by the research groups. (PO note: I invited the Lighthouse researchers to this years meeting but they couldn't attend. WDCS will discuss their research instead and we can try and get an update from the other groups and send it out later in the year).
- Operators would like clear, concise info about what the DSP is and what it aspires to (PO note: this will be discussed at this meeting and is available on the DSP website).

### **3.10 Volunteers or boats and along the coast**

- First duty is to public as a naturalist and to help the operator/skipper – data collection is secondary.
- Should have training about cetaceans, seals, basking sharks, seabirds and ocean sunfish.
- They should know about local history of waters and coastline.
- Seamanship training.
- Have dummy runs so that operator can point out areas of interest and share info with new volunteers – volunteer should make notes and use this information in their commentaries.
- Volunteers to keep log of wildlife sightings and events to be presented to operator at end of season.
- Volunteers to be sensitive to different ways of operating from boat to boat and to make sure they know how the operator/skipper wants things to be done.
- Volunteers should turn up in a fit condition to work, not refer to late nights or drinking, or have personal conversations in front of members of the public. They must be professional and represent the business they are working for.
- Train volunteers to work along the coast collecting sightings data and monitoring behaviour of recreational craft, (PO note: also providing wildlife interpretation and raising awareness of codes of conduct etc for members of the public. This project is planned for this year, starting at Chanonry Point). This could be done in association with Whiteness and the Inverness harbour developments – as they might be willing to fund this.

### **3.11 Research**

- Year round on the water, site and species studies to be carried out in association with University of Aberdeen and RSPB to allow up to date data to be shared with operators (PO note: DSP doesn't have resources to do this but other groups such as Aberdeen University and WDCS are planning research activities).
- University of Aberdeen to share their data with the group and give more up to date population estimates etc. Need to explain their photo ID methods in order to avoid misunderstandings that have led to perception of double standards in regard to approaching dolphins.
- More attention needs to be given to the behaviour of dolphins in the inner MF to ensure that advice and codes of conduct given to operators are based on up to date data.

PO notes:

- David Lusseau is planning research activities for the coming years.
- I will try to get more information from research groups like the Lighthouse Field Station and Cetacean Research and Rescue Unit. The Lighthouse have offered to organise a research workshop to share data with the group. Is anyone interested in attending?

### **3.12 Operators to attend meetings**

- Try and encourage all operators to attend the annual meetings (PO note: I have tried very hard this year through emails, telephone calls and letters. I still cannot get everyone to come. People are very busy and often have alternative work commitments in the winter).

### **3.13 Let bygones be bygones – work in true partnership.**

- Make this the year where everyone pulls together to allow the above recommendations to work and work towards the common good.
- All parties should meet and bury the hatchet and discuss the coming year. (PO note: I will meet personally with those who have not been able to attend the meeting to discuss these issues and future plans).