

# Local Culture

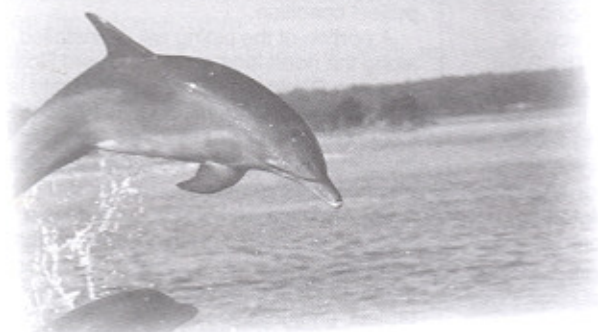
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## Coastal Showmen Need Your Support

IF YOU HAVE spent much time walking the beaches of Bogue Banks, it is likely that you have caught a glimpse of bottlenose dolphins. Perhaps you have been alerted by the enthusiastic shouts of "Porpoise!" or "Dolphins!" It's not unusual to see bottlenose dolphins traveling, feeding, resting or socializing from the beaches, bridges and riverbanks of Carteret County. Boaters can see them in most waterways, depending on the location and season.

There is a difference between dolphins and porpoises, and many people get them confused. What we see in this area are bottlenose dolphins. Venturing further offshore you're likely



to see other species of dolphins - spotted dolphins most likely. The only porpoise species that occurs near the US east coast is the harbor porpoise and it typically ranges between Virginia and Canadian waters, rarely, if ever, venturing as far south as Carteret County.

Bottlenose dolphins, ranging in lengths up to 8-10 feet and weighing 500-800 pounds (males are slightly larger than females) are larger than porpoises. Bottlenose dolphins have a large, falcate dorsal fin as opposed to the smaller, more triangular dorsal fin of a porpoise. They're both marine mammals in the taxonomic order Cetacea (which includes all whales, dolphins and porpoises) but dolphins are in the taxonomic family *Delphinidae* and porpoises are in the family *Phocoenidae*. The confusion probably stems from fishermen using the term "dolphin" to refer to the dolphin fish (also known by its Hawaiian name "mahi-mahi") and using the term "porpoise" to refer to the mammal. And I assure you that when you order "dolphin" from the menu of your favorite seafood restaurant (at least in this country), you'll be served the fish, not the mammal.

Bottlenose dolphins along the east coast of the US have been and continue to be severely and negatively impacted by human activities. Hunting them commercially, primarily for oil, leather and fertilizer, occurred as recently as the 1920s. More recently a 1987-88 die-off that killed up to half of the population prompted the National Marine Fisheries Service in 1993 to list them as depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Today, threats to dolphins include unintentional entanglement

in commercial and recreational fishing gear, ingestion of litter, contamination of food sources and boat strikes. Yet little basic information that is critical for their conservation is known such as reproductive rates, residency and migration patterns, and habitat needs.

We at the North Carolina Maritime Museum work with a small group of talented and dedicated students, volunteers and professionals to gather such information. Since 1985 we have been using photo-identification (the use of photographs of the scars and notches that dolphins acquire on their dorsal fins to recognize and verify sightings of known individuals) to study local dolphins.

Some of the dolphins that we first photographed in 1985 are still seen regularly in the waters of Carteret County. Through collaborations with the

Virginia Marine Science Museum, Nags Head Dolphin Watch, National Marine Fisheries Service, Duke Marine Lab, UNC-Wilmington, and Sea World Orlando we have tracked the movements of individuals as far south as central Florida, as far north as Long Island, NY and in many sites in between. This collaboration (sharing photos and data) is critical to the study. We are also studying association patterns and reproductive rates of known dolphins.

Some dolphins have become habituated to approaching boats for food - begging. People have fed wild dolphins, and we have received reports of people even giving the dolphins Twinkies, sunglasses or whatever is in the boat with them when they run out of fish. Lens caps, fishing hooks, lures, disposable lighters and other litter have been found inside of dead dolphin stomachs. Dolphins are wild animals, and if they get used to coming to people for food, it can endanger the animals as well as humans. Some wild dolphins have come to expect the handouts and have been known to become aggressive and bite. In addition, it is against federal law to feed or harass wild dolphins, punishable by imprisonment and/or fines.

A special "Protect Wild Dolphins" license plate can be purchased through the NC Division of Motor Vehicles (919)-861-3575 and/or your local license plate agency, the proceeds from which help support education, conservation and research programs of the NC Maritime Museum. The license plate enhances your car and demonstrates your interest in protecting dolphins and their habitat. For more information about the research program or the license plates, please visit [capelookoutstudies.org](http://capelookoutstudies.org). Please get your plate soon and encourage others to do the same to support the dolphins of the Crystal Coast. ★

