

Dolphins Learn From Each Other To Beg For Food From Humans

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<http://www.asianscientist.com/in-the-lab/dolphin-human-interaction-food-begging-behavior-2012/>

AsianScientist (Jun. 4, 2012) - A decade-long study has revealed that dolphins may learn harmful or undesirable behaviors, such as begging for food from humans, from each other.

Between 1993 and 2003, researchers from the Murdoch University Cetacean Research Group (MUCRU) and the Conservation Medicine Program observed that recreational fishers were illegally feeding the Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins in Cockburn Sound, a popular Perth waterway.

They made two observations from their study: First, the dolphins were more likely to beg from humans if they associated closely with other dolphins which had already learnt to accept food handouts; Second, begging behavior was more likely if the animals spent more time in areas with large numbers of recreational fishers.

After a decade of monitoring, the researchers found that the number of dolphins who interacted with recreational fishers for food increased from 1 to at least 14 individuals – nearly 20 percent of the dolphins resident in Cockburn Sound. These results suggest that dolphins may learn how to become beggars themselves by observing close associates beg for food.

“In humans, social learning allows novel behaviors to spread rapidly through societies. The case will be similar for much wildlife,” said marine biologist Bec Donaldson.

“Social learning makes sense in smart social animals like dolphins but most new behaviors are beneficial. It is worrying to see wildlife learning harmful behaviors.”

“Interactions between humans and wildlife are often dangerous, and may impact on threatened species. Our findings highlight how social learning may influence whether harmful behaviors spread through wildlife populations. We hope this knowledge informs policies to protect wildlife.”

Sadly, the researchers found that dolphins which beg from humans have higher rates of injury from boat strikes and entanglement in discarded fishing lines. Humans are also at risk from accidental bites during the interactions, which are illegal under state and federal law. Fines of up to \$10,000 apply from interacting with the dolphins.

More recent studies conducted on the dolphins in Cockburn Sound have shown that the greater enforcement by the Department of Environment and Conservation, extra signage, and a 18-month community education campaign in 2008 have reduced but unfortunately not eliminated illegal feeding.

Donaldson was the project officer on the federal government-funded community education campaign,

entitled "Keep Perth's dolphins and sea lions wild." Signs and interpretive shelters were constructed at boat ramps and jetties, information pamphlets were distributed, and presentations were conducted in over 100 Perth classrooms.

"We would like to expand this initiative across the state because our study suggests that even a small number of dolphins begging creates a risk of other engaging in the behavior too," added Donaldson.

"If humans do not feed dolphins, they will not get the opportunity to learn this damaging and dangerous behavior from each other."

The article can be found at: [Donaldson R et al. \(2012\) The social side of human–wildlife interaction: wildlife can learn harmful behaviours from each other.](#)

Source: [Murdoch University](#).

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