



NOAA FISHERIES

Protected Resources Division

Feeding Marine Mammals is Illegal and Harmful

Frequently Asked Questions

Is it illegal to feed a marine mammal in the wild?

Yes, feeding or attempting to feed marine mammals in the wild is illegal by anyone under Federal regulations. All marine mammals are protected by law under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Whales, dolphins, porpoises, seals, and sea lions are under NOAA Fisheries' jurisdiction and NOAA has passed regulations to protect marine mammals from harmful acts by people. If you feed or attempt to feed a marine mammal in the wild you put yourself and the animal at risk of injury and may be investigated by NOAA's Office for Law Enforcement for marine mammal harassment.

Is feeding marine mammals in the wild harmful?

Yes, feeding alters the behavior of wild marine mammals, interferes with their ability to hunt and feed and puts the animals at increased risk of injury by conditioning them to approach people and vessels for food. Marine mammals are wild animals that normally feed on live fish that they hunt and catch on their own. Feeding marine mammals can cause them to lose their natural wariness of humans or boats and condition them to beg for handouts instead of foraging for their normal prey. They can become sick if they eat food that is spoiled or food that is not part of their normal diet, or they can get injured if they are too close to boats. They may also begin taking bait and catch from fishing gear, risking injury or death by entanglement in or ingestion of the gear. There have also been a number of well publicized cases of people being bitten by dolphins and sea lions that become aggressive while begging for food, being teased with food by people, or expecting a handout.

Can marine mammals survive without human handouts?

Yes, even if a wild marine mammal has been conditioned to beg for handouts it is unlikely humans are its only source of food. A conditioned animal may continue to exhibit some changed foraging behaviors, however, it is crucial to avoid reinforcing these behaviors feeding or attempting to feed it. The best chance for an animal to survive and thrive is to find its own food and not associate food with people.

What is NOAA Fisheries doing to address the threat that feeding poses for marine mammals?

NOAA Fisheries works cooperatively with many partners to provide a consistent and constant outreach message to educate the public. Our goal is for the public to understand that feeding or attempting to feed marine mammals in the wild is harmful for the animals because it alters normal feeding behaviors, putting the animal and people at risk of injury. NOAA Fisheries Office for Law Enforcement works closely with other state and federal law enforcement agencies to post signs, investigate violation complaints, and enforce federal marine mammal regulations.

I saw someone feeding a marine mammal. How can I report a complaint?

NOAA's Office for Law Enforcement (OLE) takes reports of violations of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. You may call OLE's national hotline at 1-800-853-1964 (information may be left anonymously). You may also report the violation online at www.bewhalewise.org under the Report Violations tab. Please share any evidence you have with OLE of the violation; photos, video, and detailed information is helpful.

I think a marine mammal is injured or entangled. What should I do?

If an animal is injured or entangled please call the West Coast Marine Mammal Stranding Network hotline at [1-866-767-6114](tel:1-866-767-6114). Please take photos and provide detailed information (exact location, description of the injury or entanglement, species, etc.) to the Network group when they return your call. You can also find contact information for your local stranding network coordinator at:

http://www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/protected_species/marine_mammals/stranding_maps_and_contacts.html

Want to learn more about why feeding is illegal and harmful?

For more information about the health and safety concerns about feeding marine mammals in the wild, please visit the following websites:

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/dontfeedorharass.htm>

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/education/viewing.htm>

<http://www.bewhalewise.org/>

<http://www.bewhalewise.org/share-the-shore-with-seals/>

<http://www.dontfeedwilddolphins.org/>

For more information on how to contact NOAA's Office for Law Enforcement, please visit:

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/ole/index.html>