

Scientific Knowledge as the Basis for the Sustainability of Dolphinwatching in the Mochima National Park, Northeastern Venezuela

Bolaños-Jiménez, Jaime¹; Villarroel-Marín, Auristela J.^{1,2}

(1) *Sociedad Ecológica Venezolana Vida Marina (SEA VIDA)*, A.P. 162, Cagua, Estado Aragua, Venezuela 2122

(2) *Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador (UPEL)*, Instituto Universitario Rafael Alberto Escobar Lara, Av. Las Delicias, Maracay, Estado Aragua

Dolphin-watching and swim-with-the-dolphin programs at the Mochima National Park started in the early 1990s as opportunistic encounters associated with tourism to several islands and beaches inside the park. Although a protected area, these activities have neither been scientifically researched nor had any specific legal authorization by the relevant authorities. Since early 2004, a strategic alliance was signed between a local tour operator (Aventura Marina) and our NGO (SEA VIDA) with support from the regional Agency for Promotion of Tourism (CORANZTUR). The purpose of the alliance is to promote responsible dolphin-watching activities. Data is currently being collected in order to study the interactions and possible impacts.

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From January through June 2005, trained observers collected data on dolphin sightings aboard 16 commercial trips. On the basis of 39 sightings, we determined that dolphins were encountered at least once during each trip; the average duration of a trip was a little over 6 hours. Overall, 95% of sightings were of the long-snouted common dolphin (*Delphinus capensis*). A stenellid, most probably a spinner dolphin (*Stenella longirostris*), was once sighted. The average number of sightings per trip was 2.64 (SD=+1.22; range=1-5), with an average duration of interactions with dolphins being 25.14 min (SD=+26.81; range=3-131). The mean group size was 32.55 individuals (SD=+41.78; range=2-200), calves and juveniles making up 37% of the groups' composition. Dolphin groups approached the boat to bowride on 59% of the time and showed no reaction to the presence of the boat on 23% of encounters. On the basis of these and other findings, guidelines for the regulation of dolphin watching inside this park were presented to INPARQUES (The Venezuela National Parks Institute) and have already been considered in a proposal for modifying the park's management plan.