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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
June 27, 2008  
NR08.15

## **Shrewsbury Dolphins Need Room, Appear Healthy and Normal**

NOAA experts are continuing to evaluate a group of bottlenose dolphins feeding in New Jersey's Shrewsbury River. The biggest threat to them at the moment is the behavior of humans eager to commune with them rather than lack of food, disorientation, entrapment in the river, or their apparent health.

"It's not abnormal for coastal bottlenose dolphins to enter a high-saline river like this one in the summer to feed on the abundant prey," said Larry Hansen, Protected Resources Branch Leader at the NOAA Fisheries Service laboratory in Beaufort, N.C. "I urge people to take advantage of the chance to see and appreciate these animals, but to do so from at least 50 yards away."

NOAA researchers onsite today observed the dolphins actively feeding on menhaden, which are currently quite plentiful in the river. "The animals appear to be in good body condition, they are socializing, and do not appear to be in distress," said Annie Gorgone, a marine mammal specialist from the NOAA Fisheries Service laboratory in Beaufort, N.C. who observed the dolphins today.

NOAA has no definitive plans to move or attempt to herd the dolphins at this time, although it is preparing to do so if it becomes necessary. "It's a last resort," said Teri Rowles, director of NOAA's National Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program. Such a process is complicated, usually has mixed success, and is highly stressful for the animals sometimes resulting in death.

Coastal bottlenose dolphins are accustomed to human activities in their habitat, but close encounters can be risky for both people and the animals. Also, federal law prohibits interference with the animal's natural behavior. Harassment is punishable by fines of up to \$10,000.

Aside from the obvious dangers presented by collisions between watercraft and dolphins with sometimes fatal consequences for dolphins, swimmers can also get a nasty surprise. "These guys have teeth," said Hansen, "and they use their noses and tail flukes as battering weapons. They are very strong and are much larger than they look. In general it's best to keep your distance, slow down if you are in a water craft, and let them behave naturally. Feeding wild dolphins is also extremely hazardous."

NOAA biologists are taking the lead on day-to-day monitoring for the next few days. They will continue to observe and assess the dolphins and conduct prey sampling. They are aboard a research boat homeported at the NOAA Fisheries Service laboratory located at the James J. Howard Laboratory at Sandy Hook.

US Coast Guard has issued a notice to mariners (rebroadcast every 30 minutes) cautioning vessel operators to be cautious and use safe speeds in the area, and to keep a safe distance if the dolphins are present.

NOAA Office of Law Enforcement special agents, conservation officers from the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, and New Jersey state police officers are assisting with enforcement of laws that prohibit harassment.

If you see an injured or stranded dolphin or other marine mammal in the area, contact the Marine Mammal Stranding Center at 609-266-0538, or the US Coast Guard on Channel 16.

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**On the Web:**

NOAA's Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/>

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