

Inland Waterways News

Dolphins

Dr Simon Berrow

The seas around Ireland are home to a rich diversity of marine life including seabirds, seals, sharks and whales, dolphins and porpoises (cetaceans). Nobody can fail to be uplifted by the sight of dolphins leaping out of the water or swimming on the bow of a cruising vessel. To date 23 different cetacean species have been recorded, of which 11 are frequently observed (see <http://iwdg.ucc.ie>). Although whales such as fin, minke and pilot are regularly seen from land, dolphins including common, Risso's and bottlenose are more common and one site in particular is probably one of the best locations in Europe for seeing dolphins.

The Shannon estuary

The Shannon estuary is one of the most important sites for bottlenose dolphins in Europe and the only site in Ireland where the animals are known to be resident. Research since 1993 has shown that individual dolphins are resident all year round and that it is a calving ground with calves typically born between May and September.

Bottlenose dolphins can be encountered throughout the estuary from Ballybunnion and Loop Head to Foynes and Shannon airport, but they seem to have favourite feeding areas associated with currents. During the summer they are frequently seen off Kilcredaun Head near Carrigaholt and near Moneypoint and from the Shannon ferry crossing between Tarbert, Co Kerry and Killimer, Co Clare. There are records of bottlenose dolphins in the Shannon going back to the early 19th century but they are likely to have been there for much longer.



Dolphins

Dolphin-watching

The potential for commercial dolphin-watching was first discussed in 1991 when the West Clare Development Co-operative expressed an interest in facilitating a feasibility study. The results were very favourable with encounter rates in the outer estuary very high and some dolphins shown to be resident.

During the initial survey local boatmen from Carrigaholt and Kilrush in West Clare took a few people out to see the dolphins, but it was not until 1995 that a couple in Carrigaholt, Geoff and Sue Magee, saw the potential and widely promoted their dolphin-watching trips. In 1995, Dolphinwatch Carrigaholt carried out over 150 trips and enabled about 2,000 people to experience the joy of seeing bottlenose dolphins in the wild.

Dolphin-watching was slow to grow at first, even though more vessels started to operate from Kilrush. However, by 1999 nearly 4,000 people went dolphin-watching. With funding support from PESCA, two new purpose-built dolphin-watching boats were launched in 2000 and, helped by good weather, the number of visitors rose dramatically to over 12,000 on around 430 trips. It was clear that conservation measures had to be implemented if the rapidly expanding tourism industry was not to disturb the dolphins.



Conservation

Discussions about the conservation of the Shannon dolphins began in 1995. In 1997 the National Parks and Wildlife Service drafted a Refuge for Fauna Order to minimise disturbance, but it was never enacted as the site fulfilled the appropriate criteria for nomination as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) under the EU Habitats Directive (1992), as the conservation of bottlenose dolphins requires the designation of marine protected areas.

In April 2000, Dúchas declared the Shannon estuary a candidate SAC for bottlenose dolphins. Dolphin-watching within the SAC became a notifiable activity with operators requiring permission from the Minister of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands. Operators must fulfill certain requirements: abide by the Codes of Conduct and Conservation Plan, provide monitoring data and demonstrate competence in environmental education and species identification. The Codes of Conduct refer to the behaviour of vessels on the estuary and the Conservation Plan aims to control the total time dolphin-watching vessels are in the vicinity of dolphins.

Approved operators are accredited under a scheme called **Saoirse na Sionna** (Freedom of the Shannon) and are awarded a dolphin flag to fly from their vessels. The strength of this scheme lies in its promotion: only accredited operators have access to marketing and promotion from tourism agencies such as Shannon Development. Visitors are encouraged to support the accredited operators with the assurance that these vessels are monitored and adopt good practices. The Codes of Conduct also apply to recreational craft using the estuary and all boat users are asked to respect these codes and encourage other boaters to adopt these good practices.



The Saoirse na Sionna flag

Marine eco-tourism

The dolphins are becoming a flagship tourism product for West Clare. A recent Marine Institute project developed a brand image for West Clare which encourages visitors to explore and enjoy the fabulous coastal scenery and wildlife without degrading or disturbing the environment (see www.irrus.com). Interest in and respect for the dolphins will help ensure that habitats and wildlife populations are preserved and enhanced for everybody, visitors and local, landlubbers and boaters, to enjoy for future human and dolphin generations.

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Codes of Conduct for dolphin-watching vessels in the Shannon estuary

1. A maximum speed restriction of 7 knots applies to an area south of a line joining the cardinal buoys Beal — Tail of Beal to Kilconnelly Point, as this is an important habitat for dolphins.
2. When vessels first see dolphins they should maintain a steady course, reduce speed (<7kts) and monitor the dolphins' heading; try to steer parallel to them. Do not pursue dolphins; allow them to come to you.
3. Maintain a minimum distance between vessels of 200m.
4. No more than three tour boats in the vicinity (<500m) of the same group of dolphins at any

one time.

5. Vessels on the same group of dolphins should maintain a serial course to each other if at all possible. Do not corral dolphins between vessels.

6. Successive boats should follow the same course and come astern.

7. Maximum time in the proximity of any one group of dolphins is 30 minutes per vessel per trip.

8. New vessels into dolphin encounter zones should make VHF contact with existing vessels on Channel 8.

9. There is to be no swimming with dolphins from commercial tour boats.

