



Management of solitary sociable bottlenose dolphins: recent case studies from the UK

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BACKGROUND

Solitary sociable dolphins are especially vulnerable to anthropogenic pressures as they become increasingly habituated to human presence (Table 1). Their tendency to seek interaction can lead to injury or fatality and creates dynamic challenges for those responsible for management with a wide array of scenarios, some requiring urgent and adaptive responses. Since 2017, four solitary sociable bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) in south-west England have required active management and intervention. This presentation outlines the management techniques and tools applied during these cases, with recommendations on future use and additional measures in these situations.

Stage	Description
Stage 1	Establishes new home range; explores but stays in a small safe area. May follow boats but avoids humans.
Stage 2	Becomes habituated; follows boats more. Curious about people but keeps distance.
Stage 3	Interacts with a few familiar people; physical contact may occur. Increased active/aerial behaviour.
Stage 4	Becomes well-known and a tourist attraction. Risk of harmful or aggressive interactions due to human behaviour.

Table 1: Levels of social solitary cetacean habituation (Lone Rangers report, (Marine Connection))

CASE STUDY A: DANNY, May 2017 – October 2020

Region: Cornwall and Dorset

Behaviour

At initial observation in Cornwall, Danny was classified as a Level 2 individual, exhibiting associative behaviours with static structures (e.g.: navigational buoys) located outside harbour environments. This behaviour escalated over time to include active following of, and interaction with, vessels across a wide spatial range throughout Cornwall. In 2018, Danny relocated to Dorset, where sightings were concentrated primarily in the Weymouth and Portland areas. During this period, vessel-directed behaviours and interactions with other water users remained persistent and characteristic.

Management Measures

Management actions, coordinated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), included the early establishment of a systematic sightings log to document spatial movements, behavioural patterns, and disturbance events. Initial efforts focused on limiting public dissemination of location data to reduce unmanaged interactions. As awareness and public interest increased, targeted educational outreach was implemented to promote appropriate human behaviour. This was complemented by stakeholder engagement with local authorities and the deployment of trained volunteers to provide a visible on-site presence and guidance.

Outcome

Deceased (fatal injury consistent with vessel propeller strike).



Photo 3: Danny ID photo (Marine Discovery Penzance)

Date	Time	Location	Observer	Photo/Video	Notes
23.06.22	19:00	Newquay Harbour	Yes	Yes	Returned to the same area as earlier, followed at slow speed by a jet ski (RIB) video from rider on FB, also approached by small sailing boats that partially surrounded it, but dolphin had plenty of opportunity to get around them as they were very slow moving.
05.07.22		Mouset's Bay	Yes on FB	Yes	Boarding.
07.07.22		Mouset's Bay and Lamorna	No	No	Raised by the boat and did not seem too interested, briefly approached then moved on again.
08.07.22		Longship's Lighthouse	Yes	Yes	Inshore of the lighthouse for most of the day and seen on a few different trips out. Not very interested in the boat.
11.07.22	07:30	Portsmouth	No	No	Caller reports a lone dolphin playing close to shore with swimmers from around 7.30am to after dawn.
11.07.22	13:00	Portsmouth	No	No	Call via Fisherman off Portsmouth that John is following his boat.
11.07.22	19:35	Little Fistral beach, Newquay	Yes	Yes	Brushing and tail slapping near some swimmers.
11.07.22		Fistral beach, Newquay	Yes on FB	Yes	Interacting with an RNLI Lifeguard on a paddleboard.
14.07.22	14:00	St Ives	No	No	Near the harbour, however no tour boats running due to northerly winds so only a small number of people around.
17.07.22	Afternoon	Portsmouth Civic, Penzance	Yes on FB	Yes	Interacting with swimmers.
19.07.22		St Ives	Yes on FB	Yes	Interacting with swimmers and St Ives Surf School.
20.07.22	11:00	St Ives	Yes	Yes	Rubbing up against marker buoys off Portgaviden beach and coming within 10m of the beach at high tide.
21.07.22	10:00	St Ives	No	No	Feeding off Portsmouth beach.
21.07.22	13:00	St Ives	No	No	Near some of the rib boats, one of which approached briefly. Some of the self hire boats asked to keep a distance.
22.07.22	19:10 - 21:45	St Ives	Yes	Yes	Off Portgaviden close to the marker buoy again at 19:10. At 20:50 was rubbing against a red buoy in the moorings area 400m off the harbour for around 20 mins, then approached the rib boat 'Tiger Lily' as it dropped off passengers via tender, breaching near a yacht a few times. Tour boat then approached the dolphin but it disappeared. At 21:20 the dolphin reappeared near some mooring buoys and was rubbing against them again. The tender for another tour boat came out and went looking for it, but did not manage to get close as the animal became mobile. It then came very close to the harbour, in about 1.5m of water, off the New Pier buoy and was rubbing against this as well and began tail slapping, breached and then headed out north.
23.07.22	19:10 - 21:45	St Ives	Yes	Yes	Boarding Dolly P.
23.07.22	15:48	St Ives	Yes	Yes	Being followed by seven self drive hire boats. Harbourmaster had to radio the superior to ask them to get away from the dolphin, and as they went outside of their designated area. At 16:50 the dolphin went around the island to Portgaviden beach and back again then hung around near some buoys off Smeaton's pier until 18:30.
15.08.22	10:00	Hayle	Yes	Yes	Average 30m surface for every five minutes due time. Flung at the back of the surf with swimmers and some boats. Didn't stay long though.

Photo 4: John sightings and behaviour log (BDMLR)



Photo 5: Nick with propeller injuries (IWDG)



Photo 6: Reggie interacting with swimmer (Mirror)

CASE STUDY C: JOHN, March – August 2022

Region: Cornwall

Behaviour

Behavioural patterns demonstrated gradual progression from Level 2, characterised by loose associations with vessels and paddle craft in proximity to harbours and high-use recreational beaches, to Level 3, involving more direct and regular interactions with people.

Management Measures

Management actions, led by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), included the maintenance of a sightings log to document spatial distribution, behavioural changes, and disturbance events. Initial efforts focused on limiting public dissemination of information; however, as awareness increased, targeted key messaging was implemented alongside engagement with relevant authorities. A visible volunteer presence was deployed on an intermittent basis to support monitoring and public guidance.

Outcome

Presumed survived.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the measures used in these case studies, data recording supported improved tracking of movements, habitat use, behavioural progression, and incidents of disturbance or inappropriate human behaviour. The recorded information was integral to management planning, visible policing, targeted messaging, and broader public-awareness efforts. In cases A, B and C, the management strategy centred on systematic sightings recording, outreach to key authorities, and coordinated public messaging. Proactive, well-coordinated communication - supported by cooperation between agencies, NGOs, and community stakeholders - can yield substantial benefits. Strategised public messaging plays a vital role in reducing harmful human interactions and helping protect these unique animals.

A precautionary, evidence-led approach is required for the protection and management of solitary, sociable cetaceans, particularly as UK records increase. This should involve targeted legislation combining short- and long-term measures. Short-term actions include emergency STOP orders, strengthened bylaw powers, immediate penalties for disturbance, and temporary exclusion zones for human activity. Long-term strategies should establish structured, strategic legislative protection. Effective implementation depends on adequate enforcement resources and case-specific management that accounts for local environmental and human factors. In the absence of a central coordinating body, efforts should be led by researchers, NGOs, and welfare organisations, supported by robust legislative frameworks.

CASE STUDY D: REGGIE, May – September 2025

Region: Dorset

Behaviour

Initially classified as a Level 2 individual, behaviour progressed relatively rapidly to Level 4. This escalation was characterised by increasingly intense and boisterous interactions with water users, including incidents resulting in human injury. The individual also sustained injuries consistent with a vessel propeller strike.

Management Measures

Management was led by a statutory body, with support from non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Interventions included the dissemination of targeted public messaging, incorporating an online community engagement session, alongside coordinated engagement with relevant authorities. A consistent visible presence of staff and trained volunteers was maintained to support monitoring and promote risk mitigation behaviours among water users.

Outcome

Presumed survived.

Wild dolphin in this area

It is exciting to see a wild dolphin and understandable people want a closer look - but this could put you, and the dolphin, in danger - remember this is a wild animal.

Please follow these recommended guidelines:

PUBLIC OBSERVERS

- ❌ DO NOT - enter the water to attempt to touch, grab or interact with the dolphin
- ❌ DO NOT - feed or attempt to feed the dolphin as this can lead to health problems and invite contact
- ✅ DO - watch from the shore from a safe area
- ✅ DO - report any inappropriate activity such as harassment of the dolphin by calling 101

WATER USERS

- ✅ DO - keep to a steady straight course, put engine in neutral if dolphin approaches
- ✅ DO - keep your distance (100m)
- ✅ DO - if the dolphin is frequenting a specific area (to rest or feed), do not disturb
- ❌ DO NOT - chase or change direction to follow the dolphin as sudden manoeuvres can result in impact
- ❌ DO NOT - encourage the dolphin near your vessel as this can result in injury from propellers

For more information scan QR code:

**It is an offence to disturb or harm dolphins under Section 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981
DO - respect this as a wild animal, not trained for entertainment
DO - above all, enjoy having the experience of seeing a dolphin wild and free

marineconnection.org
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Image © Colin Garrett

Photo 7: social solitary dolphin awareness poster (MC)



Photo 8: memorial monument to Danny in Dorset (MC)

References:

Lone Rangers Report



Nick swimming with crowd film

