

Monkey Mia Dolphin Experience

The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) manages the Monkey Mia Dolphin Experience within the Shark Bay Marine Park, providing a world-renowned nature-based tourism experience for visitors. Below are a few common questions and answers on the dolphin experience.

What makes Monkey Mia special?

Since the 1940s, visitors to Monkey Mia have been able to enjoy the unique experience of feeding a small group of wild bottlenose dolphins. As one of the longest histories of dolphin interaction experiences in the world, this managed feeding program aims to inspire and educate visitors about the dolphins, marine conservation, and the World Heritage values in Shark Bay. The program is delivered in an ecologically sustainable and safe way.

The dolphin experience contributes significantly to the local tourism industry and regional economy, attracting more than 100,000 visitors each year. The program also delivers many social benefits to the local community and is a gateway to other tourism experiences in Shark Bay.

How is the dolphin experience managed?

DBCA manages the experience under the *Monkey Mia Dolphin Experience Management Program 2020*. The development of the Management Program was informed by a review conducted in 2018 by independent external scientists, and feedback received from key stakeholders, scientists and an independent peer assessment in 2020.

The welfare of dolphins and their calves is a key priority, with strict protocols and best-practice standards in place to ensure their health and natural behaviours of the wild dolphin community are maintained. This includes:

- Only providing around 10 per cent of the dolphins' daily dietary requirement to ensure they continue to forage for themselves.
- A dolphin health program involving daily monitoring which is guided by veterinary advice.
- Following National Wildlife Biosecurity Guidelines for feeding and handling of food to ensure the health of the animals is maintained.

The dolphins of Shark Bay have been the focus of local and international research teams since 1982 and are one of the most researched groups of dolphins in the world. Ongoing research and monitoring, together with regular reviews and updates to the management protocols, allow new evidence to inform an adaptive management approach.

Does the experience impact dolphins or their calves?

Over the 27 years that DBCA has managed the dolphin experience, research shows that the provisioning (feeding) under strict protocols has not affected the life expectancy of adult provisioned dolphins or posed any threat to the broader Shark Bay dolphin population. The survival of calves born to provisioned dolphins is comparable to those in the wider Shark Bay dolphin population. Additionally, the provisioning program may provide protective benefits during periods of injury or food shortages, such as those caused by marine heatwaves.

How many dolphins are in the experience?

Indo Pacific bottlenose dolphins are found throughout the world, and the Shark Bay population is estimated to be 3000. Only a small group participates in the feeding program at Monkey Mia. Currently there are two dolphins participating in the feeding program, Piccolo aged 32 and Kiya aged 27, and there are also over 40 dolphins that visit the beach.

The Management Program seeks to maintain five to seven dolphins in the feeding program.

DBCA is continuing to look at ways to recruit dolphins into the experience to ensure long-term continuation of this iconic nature-based tourism experience whilst ensuring best-practice animal welfare standards are met.

How are new dolphins attracted into the experience?

Monkey Mia is part of the dolphins' natural home range and hunting grounds. The dolphins are wild animals that hunt for their own food at Monkey Mia. They visit the beach of their own accord, and they choose whether to accept a fish that is offered by a trained DBCA staff member.

The recruitment of new dolphins is attempted by offering a fish to dolphins that line up at the beach as part of the experience. It can take months to years before a dolphin may accept fish to the maximum daily limit which is 10 per cent of their daily food requirements. Dolphins must continue to forage and hunt as a wild animal for the rest of their food intake.

A key component of the recruitment strategy is - it always remains the dolphin's choice as to whether or not it accepts a fish.

A trial of alternative recruitment strategies including offering fish to candidate dolphins at an alternative area within the Monkey Mia Recreation Zone and at different times outside the morning dolphin experience has also been undertaken.

A trial of occasionally offering fish to younger dolphins to support calf learning of hand-feeding under strict protocols and procedures will also be undertaken.

Are calves being fed?

Under the trial of alternative recruitment strategies, trained DBCA staff will occasionally offer a fish to younger dolphins from 18 months to 2 years of age that line up at the beach with their mothers. This aims to enable calf learning of handfeeding.

While it is anticipated that younger dolphins of this age may not accept a fish, this offering may support their learning so that when they are aged over two years old and start weaning from their mother's milk, they will have learned this specialised technique.

DBCA will analyse monitoring undertaken during the trial to inform future recruitment strategies.

How is DBCA protecting the dolphins and their calves?

The health of the dolphins visiting the beach is a priority and is monitored daily by DBCA staff and volunteers. Veterinary advice also provides high quality information on dolphin health including for calves.

A trained DBCA staff member monitors the animals during the experience and undertakes daily risk assessments to ensure best-practice animal welfare safeguards are in place, particularly for mothers and calves. This includes monitoring the time they spend at the beach and assessing risks to mothers and calves such as separation.

Calves are unable to suckle from their mothers in shallow water, so it is important to keep feeding sessions short (a maximum of 20 minutes) so that nursing mothers can spend most of their time away from the

shore. For this reason, dolphins with calves are offered fish under the mother and calf protocol to ensure that they continue to receive their normal feed. This is undertaken by trained staff and with a shorter feed time to ensure the mother spends as much time with their calf away from the shore.

Dolphins that have had a new calf have a higher calorific need to support milk production, and any experienced mother that shows up to the beach with their calf from eight weeks of age or older, may be offered a fish under the trial of alternative recruitment strategies and the mother and calf protocol. For first-time mothers, calves will have to be six-months or older before the mother is offered fish.

Strict protocols and animal welfare safeguards ensures mothers and calves spend most of their time behaving as wild dolphins including establishing natural foraging abilities and social networks.

What is the best way to see the dolphins?

The best way to see dolphins is to join one of the morning viewing experiences. There is a maximum of three daily feeding sessions between 7:45 am and midday, however on most days feeding is completed by 10:00 am, allowing the dolphins most of the day to undertake their natural wild behaviours. The exact timing of the feeds is dependent on when the dolphins choose to come to the beach.

The Monkey Mia beach, in front of the RAC Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort, is part of the natural foraging range of the local dolphins and they can often be observed feeding, resting or socialising close to shore throughout the day.

Commercial boat tours are available at Monkey Mia and provide excellent opportunities to see dolphins and other marine life, including turtles and dugongs, in the adjacent Shark Bay Marine Park.

For more information on visiting Monkey Mia, contact the Monkey Mia Visitors Centre on (08) 99481366.

Can I feed and swim with the dolphins outside the program?

No, the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* provides protection to dolphins and the feeding, swimming or interacting with dolphins (within 50 metres in the water or 100 metres from a vessel) outside the Monkey Mia Dolphin Experience is not permitted without lawful authority from DBCA.

The Monkey Mia dolphins are wild animals and for their welfare, it is vital that they be allowed to conduct their lives in their near-natural habitats free of interference. If a dolphin approaches you while you are in the water at Monkey Mia, you must move away until the distance between you and the dolphin is at least 50 metres.

Why does DBCA charge entry fees to Monkey Mia Conservation Park?

All money collected through the attraction fee is reinvested in the management of the Monkey Mia Conservation Park and Dolphin Experience, including through the maintenance of facilities and provision of education and interpretive materials and programs for visitors.