

ASU to offer marine mammal course in Bahamas

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

One of the most popular courses offered by Arkansas State University in the summer is an international class where students get their feet (and their bodies) wet.

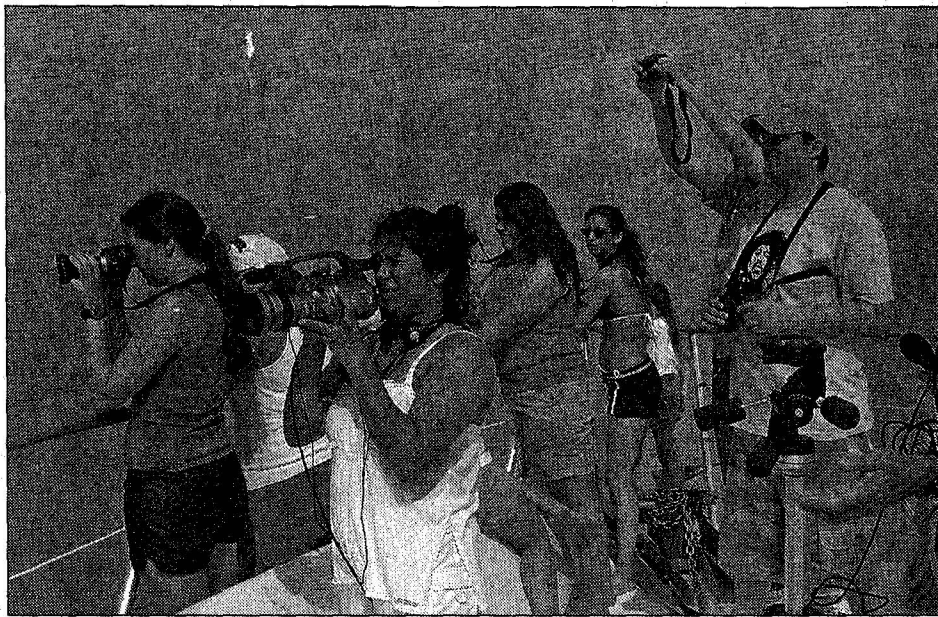
The course "Field course on marine mammals" takes place in the Bahamas. For one full week students stay in a research vessel and work with dolphins in their natural environment: the ocean.

The course's popularity stems from several factors. One is the fascination that people feel toward marine mammals for their intelligence and friendliness. Another is the fact that this course provides the unique experience of swimming next to these animals, which allows direct observation of their behavior.

Sometimes, however, it seems that the dolphins are the ones observing the students. When the students get into the water in the areas where both spotted and bottle-nosed dolphins are found, the dolphins approach the students with a great deal of interest, observing how they swim and snorkel in the aquatic environment.

On one occasion, one of the students was three months pregnant, and because dolphins can use their echolocating capabilities or "sonar" to "see" inside the body, they congregated around the student to "look" at the fetus. It is believed that the ultrasounds received back by dolphins form an image in their brain similar to that of a sonogram like the images one can see at a doctor's office.

During this course students get involved in a great deal of hands-on experiences. For example, they photograph the dolphins in order to be able to separate different individuals based on their body markings. They also video-



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A group of Arkansas State University students videotape and photograph dolphins during a marine mammal course.

tape their behavior and develop a graphic narrative of their findings called an ethogram.

In one occasion the students observed a mixed pod of both spotted and bottle-nosed dolphins. That rare event was video taped and studied.

Students also record the sounds produced by dolphins using an underwater microphone or hydrophone. Those recordings are also used to identify individuals since, like humans, dolphins have a unique "voice" just like humans called a "signature whistle" that can be singled out by using a computer program.

Students also develop a census of the number of dolphins in the area by counting them and using mathematical models to calculate the size of the local dolphin population.

The research vessel used in this course as a base for operations and as a place to eat and sleep is called "Tibur-

on" ("shark" in Spanish). This is a 63-foot vessel with air conditioning, research equipment and a range of 1200 miles. The boat is annually inspected by the U.S. Coast Guard.

For many students this is not only a unique academic experience but also a personal one. Some students taking this course have never seen the ocean, much less swam with dolphins in the wild.

For everybody this course is an extraordinary lifetime experience.

For more information contact the ASU Department of Biological Sciences at biology@astate.edu.

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