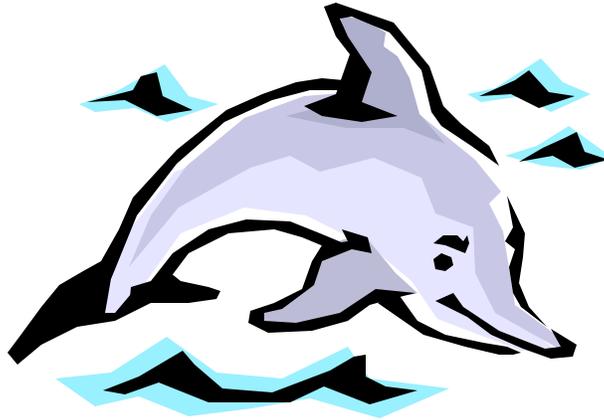


Differences in Dorsal Fins



Objective

Students will learn how researchers identify dolphins in the wild by looking at their dorsal fins.

Background

Researchers involved in the study of marine mammals frequently have to identify individual animals for various studies. When trying to identify an individual wild dolphin it can be quite difficult due to the fact that when they surface it is usually to take a breath. This only gives you a couple of seconds to see the animals face, thus making it very hard for a researcher to identify facial features. If a researcher can get a good look or photo of a dolphin's dorsal fin this is the easiest way to tell who is who. Like a human fingerprint, no two dorsal fins are exactly the same. Each dorsal fin has its own unique shape, height, thickness, markings and notches. A dolphin's dorsal fin acquires various scars and markings during the dolphin's lifetime. The dorsal fin lacks blubber and is made of cartilage. Many populations of wild dolphins are extensively catalogued by dorsal fin photographs, which allow researchers to study specific groups of dolphins for many years.

Materials needed

- Blank papers cut in the shape of a dolphin's dorsal fin. One should be made for each student.
- Large pieces of paper. One for each student.
- Markers or crayons
- Glue
- Washable inkpad
- Tape

Activity

1. Discuss with students the difference between each dolphin's dorsal fin. (photos are helpful, but optional)
2. Give each student a cut out of a dorsal fin.
3. Have students color their dorsal fin however they wish.
4. Give each student a large piece of paper and have them glue their dorsal fin in the center of it.
5. Have each student put their fingerprint next to their decorated dorsal fin.
6. Hang each student's paper side by side on the wall with tape.
7. Have each student observe all of the different dorsal fins and fingerprints.

What do they see? Is each dorsal fin the same? Is each fingerprint the same? Discuss that this activity illustrates how researchers can identify wild dolphins by their dorsal fins. Each fin is different just like the ones they made and just like the students' fingerprints are different.