Dolphins are among the most social creatures in the animal kingdom, with relationships so complex that they’re often compared to those of primates. But a certain primate—humans—can disrupt dolphin bonds.

According to a new study, a dolphin that's been injured by a boat or fishing gear may feel the social consequence in the form of decreased associations. In the year following their injury, the injured dolphin is less likely to be found with their closest peers.

In 2017, Michelle Greenfield, a photographer based in Washington, DC, spent years studying Atlantic spotted dolphins in the Bahamas. If she's not in the ocean, she enjoys hiking and exploring the mountains.

Greenfield is the lead author of a new study published in the journal Conservation Biology that examines how human-caused injuries disrupt dolphins' social lives. In the past two decades, Greenfield and her colleagues counted 26 dolphins that had sustained injuries from boat strikes or entanglement between 1982 and 2018. The researchers identified these animals' social circles in the year prior to injury and in the two years following.

Threats include the gross loss of friends. According to Greenfield, one thing is clear: when a dolphin gets injured, its community feels the effects. One person who was not involved in the new study says the result is compelling because it directly shows how human-caused injuries disrupt dolphins' social lives.

"The problem is that often our effects dolphins' social lives. "

It's also possible a dolphin's personality changes after it's hurt, making it less choosy about who they hang around, she says—so long as they have someone to turn to for protection.

Randall Wells, a marine mammal biologist and director of SDRP, emphasizes that dolphins are long-lived animals that rely on other dolphins for survival. So, although a dolphin can carry on after an injury, its social life might not recover immediately.

Greenfield says the study is compelling because it directly shows how human-caused injuries disrupt dolphins' social lives. Effects are long-lasting and, in some cases, might also make injured dolphins less choosy about who they hang around, she says—so long as they have someone to turn to for protection.

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