

## **The Online Citizen**

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### **Reuse, Reduce, Recycle. What does that have to do with dolphins?**

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Resorts World Sentosa's (RWS) recent acquisition of wild dolphins has led to much uproar among Singaporeans. However, in all the commotion, we may have forgotten about other wild dolphins which have been held captive in Singapore for the past 12 years.

Dolphin Lagoon, a tourist attraction on the island of Sentosa, is still up and running and it houses six indo-pacific hump-backed dolphins in a cramped concrete pool.

Curious as to why all the attention has shifted so quickly, TOC decided to investigate the dolphinarium and whether it is as big an issue as RWS.

A junior staff member, whom we spoke to, explained that these are in-bred captive dolphins and that there are more pools located in the facility where the dolphins can swim freely. He further added that dolphin lagoon handles its dolphins more humanely and this is what sets them apart from RWS.

After sitting through the half-hour dolphin and sea-lion show, we approached one of the dolphin trainers to gather more information on in-bred captivity. However, she refused to answer our questions, due to 'protocol', and directed us to the duty manager.

The duty manager was more at ease in answering our questions and reiterated that all six dolphins are in-bred captive dolphins, but four of these dolphins are actually from an "exchange program in Thailand".

However, he declined to answer our questions on differences between dolphin lagoon and RWS.

In-bred captivity or...?

We of course were eager to find out more about the impacts of in-bred captivity and engaged in our own research. However in-bred captivity in Singapore did not yield many substantial hits and we were about to give up when we chanced upon a report by ACRES on dolphin lagoon, titled 'Suffering, not Smiling'.

The report claimed that four of the dolphins were indeed caught from the wild and that Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA), which regulates wildlife imports, said that there was a clerical error in processing Underwater World Sentosa (UWS)'s permit to acquire these dolphins (see [HERE](#)). AVA confirmed that only two of the six endangered dolphins were captive bred and the rest were caught from the wild.

We decided to visit ACRES at 91 Jalan Lekar, to gather more evidence on this issue.

## Incompetence and irresponsibility

Mr Louis Ng, founder of ACRES, confirmed that four of the dolphins were actually caught in the gulf of Thailand. He said that this was deduced quite easily as UWS claimed that the dolphins were born at Oasis Sea World thirty years ago. It is curious to note that Oasis Sea World did not even exist thirty years ago – it was founded about 20 years ago.

ACRES then lodged a complaint with the Thai Forestry Police who, after much investigation, managed to elicit a confession from Oasis Sea World which admitted to taking in wild dolphins caught by fishermen.

Soon after this discovery, UWS, in a public statement, said that the dolphins were rescued from Thailand where they were meant to be food.

As mentioned previously, AVA announced that there was clerical error in UWS's permit to acquire the dolphins. It said that UWS stated "a number of dolphins" were in-bred captive dolphins and AVA assumed that this applies to all six of the dolphins. AVA also revealed that the misunderstanding arose because UWS did not fill a required field on the permit application. This field requires the applicant to state the source, or origins, of the animals.

AVA also announced that UWS can still keep the dolphins as it is classified as a zoological facility, which is permitted to import wild endangered species. It added that Thailand has approved the export as well.

Miss Lye Fong Keng, head of AVA's wildlife regulatory branch, went on record to say that UWS had not misrepresented any information regarding the source of the six dolphins. She further elaborated in the year 2004, that UWS had mentioned that the dolphins were held in captivity in Thailand for three years. Miss Lye also emphasised that neither Thailand nor CITES (The Convention on international Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) have imposed a ban on the export of these wild cetaceans.

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan (who was then Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports) seconded Miss Lye's sentiments saying that acquisition of the six hump-backed dolphins "did not contravene CITES's requirements".

While these justifications may seem credible, it is irrelevant in light of the fact that the application was processed and approved despite UWS's failure to fill in a compulsory field. It is surely bizarre that AVA, a government agency, has not revoked dolphin lagoon's license to date. This can only be deemed as irresponsible and incompetent.

In a later statement, Miss Lye said that AVA and Thai officials would be "making corrections" to their "permit and annual record matters".

It is amusing to note that making corrections to documents would automatically improve the living conditions of these dolphins who are forced to live in confined spaces as opposed to swimming freely in the wild.

Regressing instead of improving

Speaking of living conditions, these dolphins were initially kept at Palawan Beach, which provided a more natural habitat than its current quarters.

Imagine you are a wild dolphin swimming freely with your pod mates in the ocean 40 to 50 miles a day, living in a world full of familiar sights, smells and sounds.

Suddenly, you are captured and stripped away from your family, friends and your natural world and placed in an foreign environment. You struggle to adapt to this unfamiliar environment alone and as you are beginning to adjust to it, you are taken away yet again to another foreign body of water.

However due to an unfortunate incident regarding a fatal stonefish bite, all the dolphins were moved to their current location – an open air enclosure which resembles an oblong lap pool. It should be stressed that this less-than-Olympic sized pool hold six fully grown dolphins.

“You should improve the conditions of these dolphins! Instead, we are regressing quite terribly.”, lamented Mr Louis Ng

Since ACRES’s 2003 campaign, dolphin lagoon has discontinued more of the circus styled tricks such as using the dolphins as water skis and some of the more extensive ball tricks.

They have also stopped dolphin beaching and have hiked the prices of their photography sessions in an effort to reduce dolphin petting.

The dolphin’s skin is very sensitive to sunlight and can get burnt upon overexposure to the sun. Trainers at dolphin lagoon used to avoid this problem by splashing water constantly on the dolphin’s back.

“Reuse, Reduce, Recycle. What does that have to do with dolphins?”

There is really no justification in keeping these dolphins if you think about it. As audience members who have witnessed the dolphin show, we can attest that there is no real educational value.

Nevertheless, UWS insists that education and awareness, as opposed to profits and entertainment, are their primary reasons for hosting such shows.

Mr Ng brings up a good point: “I believe their message is reduce, reuse, recycle. What does that have to with dolphins? That is more relevant to rainforests.”

Instead, we could adopt Monterey Bay Aquarium’s example, which uses life-sized models of dolphins and whales to educate rather than housing live marine mammals in artificial habitats.

Mr Ng says that this will be a much better and more applauded alternative, if education is the main goal of UWS.

He also questions the credibilty of UWS, saying, “How good can an educator possibly be if he cannot tell the truth of where these dolphins came from?”

Repatriate, Rehabilitate, Release

UWS has not publicly admitted to owning wild dolphins, to date. On the contrary, it has continued to mislead the general public (and quite possibly their staff members as well) by claiming that these dolphins are from an exchange program in Thailand or saved in a rescue mission. If these dolphins were rescued, wouldn't it be natural to rehabilitate and release them back into the wild? Why conduct daily shows?

Mr Ng agrees that having dolphin attractions are highly profitable but he also points out that developing countries like Mexico and Chile are imposing bans on the export of live cetaceans, choosing to forgo profits in order to focus on moral progress.

"As a developed country, I am sure we can forgo the huge profits that have been involved.", he opined.

This is indeed true as Singapore's economy seems to be doing well and does not need to imprison these sentient creatures in order to make money. We should instead, rehabilitate and release the dolphins from both UWS and RWS back into the wild and focus our energies into conserving this endangered species rather than capturing them and forcing them to perform for profits.

Adopting Monterey Bay's model is an ideal alternative and we should concentrate our efforts into petitioning for such an aquarium. Such change will undoubtedly require an indefinite period of time, but we can still do our parts by not buying a ticket to any dolphin facility and spreading awareness to our fellow citizens.