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Animal groups seek return of Solomon dolphins in Subic to their native habitat

By Khrysta Imperial Rara, VERA Files

Representatives of Manila and Singapore-based animal protection groups are blocking the reported plan to send the dolphins in Subic to Singapore. They also want them returned to where they came from- Solomon Islands.

The campaign, "Save the World's Saddest Dolphins" launched at the Bonifacio Global City in Taguig last weekend gained urgency because of reports learned by the animal protection groups that the dolphins will be sent to Singapore by the end of this year where they will be one of the main attractions in Resorts World Sentosa that will open its (marine) park next year.

"The main thing here is to block the re-export of the dolphins to Singapore. We believe that Philippine laws should be upheld and Section 6 of the Wildlife Resources Conservation Act of the Philippines was violated," Louis Ng, a biologist and executive director of Singapore charity Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES), said in an interview at DZUP last week.

Ng is referring to the Republic Act 9147 which states that "All activities... shall be authorized by the Secretary upon proper evaluation of best available information or scientific data showing that the activity is, or for a purpose, not detrimental to the survival of the species or subspecies involved and/or their habitat."

Investigations by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature — Cetacean Specialist Group (IUCNCSG) in 2003 and 2007 concluded that there was no sufficient population data for the Solomon Islands to make a valid Non-Detriment Finding, or an expert scientific opinion showing that the export or trade will not put the survival of the *Tursiops aduncus* species at risk.

"So the import permits for the 25 dolphins from the Solomon Islands were issued without proper evaluation of the best available scientific data that the importation will not be detrimental to the population of wild dolphins in the Solomon Islands," Earth Island Regional Director Trixie Concepcion said.

"The Philippine government should revoke the permit and send the dolphins back to the Islands," Ng reiterated.

Officers of ACRES, Earth Island Institute (EII) and the Philippine Welfare Society (PAWS), who visited Ocean Adventure in Subic this week to see 25 Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins were told to leave the area immediately and prevented from filming the animals.

The group bought admission tickets and proceeded to the area opposite to where the wild-caught dolphins were being housed. They said there were no signs banning entry to and filming in this area.

"Initially, we were told we could remain in the area but were not allowed to film the dolphins. However, we were later politely told to leave the area and we were not allowed to film the dolphins, but could film anywhere else in Ocean Adventure. We did not hold any placards or hold any

demonstration and remained civil throughout the entire time. We eventually left the area," ACRES Campaigns Officer Christina Lee recounted in a press statement.

According to the ACRES, the group saw and filmed the trainers using basketballs and hula-hoops during the training. "We are puzzled by this as RWS has always maintained that they have no plans for animal shows," the statement said.

ACRES is focused on battling the illegal wildlife trade as well as promoting cruelty-free living, community outreach, wildlife rescue and rehab, zoo animal welfare and humane education.

"A vast majority of Singaporeans have spoken up now. They support the issue. The people really want to take action," Ng said.

During the groups' meeting last Nov. 11 at the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) of the Department of Agriculture, Assistant Director Benjamin Tabios assured the them that there are no pending applications for permits to import or export any dolphins.

"But that situation could change anytime. Someone could suddenly apply for a permit," Tabios said.

Returning the 25 dolphins to their native waters will be long and costly.

"We hope that Resorts World Sentosa will shoulder the expense of bringing them back to where they were caught. RWS can afford this because in the first quarter of this year, they made a pre-tax profit of 500 million Singapore dollars which is equivalent to 400 million US dollars. And that was even without the dolphins," Ng stated.

"But if RWS does not shoulder the cost, ACRES and Earth Island will," he said.

According to him, RWS originally bought the 27 dolphins in the Solomon Islands at 60,000 US dollars each. Two of the dolphins died while under training in Langkawi, Malaysia.

The Subic trip was part of a campaign to inform the Filipino people of the Solomon dolphin issue. In the coming weeks, the campaign will be brought to different universities in Metro Manila and the provinces. "The dolphins have lost control over their lives. They can't speak for themselves so it's up to us to speak for them, to fight for their rights and hopefully to secure their freedom," Ng stressed.

"We are asking Filipinos and Singaporeans to put themselves in the situation of the dolphins. Would you like to be forcibly removed from your house? Would you like to be put on an artificial diet? Would you like to be imprisoned forever?" Ng asked. "The answer for everyone is 'no'. So why are we doing this to dolphins?"

Other countries like Chile and Costa Rica have enacted laws banning cetacean hunting in their territorial waters. In Costa Rica, the killing, capture, injuring or use of whales, dolphins and porpoises for commercial gain is not allowed. The government of the Solomon islands has banned the export of dolphins starting January 2012.

Other groups involved in the campaign are Marine Wildlife Watch (MWWP), Wild Bird Club of the Philippines (WBCP), Dolphins Love Freedom Network (DLFN), and Save Philippine Seas (SPS). Care and Responsibility for Animals (CARA), Animal Kingdom Foundation (AKF), Palawan Animal Welfare Association as well as the animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) are also supporting the campaign.