

GMA News

22 November 2011

Wildlife activists campaign to save 'world's saddest dolphins'

CA RMELA G. LA PEÑA

Marine conservationists have launched a campaign to urge the Philippine government not to re-export 25 dolphins, currently held at the Ocean Adventure Park in Subic, to Singapore and instead, release them back to the wild.

Louise Ng, Executive Director of the Animal Concerns Education and Research Society of Singapore (AC RES), said a growing number of Singaporeans have voiced their opposition to keeping the dolphins, which were caught in the wild from the Solomon Islands, as show animals for Resorts World Singapore.

"We had people forming a huge dolphin shape, to get everyone together, enjoy music and then to take action to show results that over a thousand people can gather on a Sunday afternoon to let these dolphins go," Ng told GMA News Online at the Save the World's Saddest Dolphins campaign launch held November 12-13 at the Bonifacio Global City in Taguig.

Since May this year, AC RES and the non-profit Earth Island Institute (EII) have launched an international campaign to urge Resorts World Singapore to free the 25 dolphins. So far, the campaign has generated over a million signatures in its online petition.

"The ultimate objective is to send them back to Solomon Islands where they belong," said local marine life crusader A.G. Saño, who has created dolphin-themed murals called the Dolphins Love Freedom Network all over the country.

Other campaign supporters are the Wild Bird Club of the Philippines, Save Philippine Seas, Philippine Animal Welfare Society, and Marine Mammal Wildlife Watch of the Philippines.

Role of zoos

In an open letter to animal lovers, however, Resorts World defended its plan to keep the dolphins in its Marine Life Park.

"Resorts World aims to educate and enrich the understanding and protection of the oceans, and the Marine Life Park will serve as a showcase for ocean science education, research and stewardship," says Resorts World on its website.

"There is the point of view that animals born in the wild should not be kept in zoological facilities, that they should roam free. But at the same time, there is also a view of many animal experts and millions of people who support zoos and aquariums that zoological facilities can provide inspiration to those living in urban communities," said Resorts World.

"Zoos and oceanariums play an important role in giving people the opportunity to come up close with different species of the animal kingdom. Without this access, could our children grow up with any real awareness, understanding or appreciation of the animal species that share this planet with

us? Is watching documentaries or reading about them enough to create empathy and conservation action?" Resorts World asks.

A report on C hannel News Asia says that the dolphins were originally kept in Langkawi, but after two dolphins died of acute bacterial infection in October 2010, the rest of the dolphins were moved to the Philippines.

"All our dolphins in Subic Bay today are very healthy, and we hopefully will be able to bring them, what I call back home here, in the next 12 months," Resorts World Sentosa CEO Tan Hee Teck was quoted as saying in the report.

Sought for comment on why the dolphins were placed there, the Subic Bay Marine Exploratorium Inc. responded with a press release that said in part, "All animals at Ocean Adventure are here under government permits and with the oversight of the appropriate agencies. The company provides for the holding and care of animals for other organizations, under contract and with all necessary government permits."

Petition to BFAR

In a petition addressed to Agriculture Secretary Proceso Alcala and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) Director Asis Perez, the groups called on the Philippine government to deny the export of the 25 dolphins to Resorts World. They cited scientific reports prepared by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) showing that the harvest of wild dolphins from the Solomon Islands may not be sustainable and could further endanger the local population of dolphins in the island nation. Last September, its government announced that it will ban all dolphin hunts in their territory beginning next year.

The campaigners said scientific studies have proven that dolphins, whales, and other cetaceans are not suited for a life of captivity. They added that the captive animals are bottlenosed dolphins, which are listed as "Endangered Species" by BFAR.

"Dolphins are highly social creatures that are accustomed to being in family pods. In the wild, they roam thousands of kilometers of ocean together. They are used to exploring three-dimensional underwater worlds full of sounds, sights, movement, color, varying landscapes and changing currents," said the group.

"Yet, given all this information, the 25 dolphins that are now in the Philippines are still being trained as show animals and kept under tight security at the Ocean Adventure Park in Subic Bay, Philippines. It is time to rehabilitate and return them back to their home in the Solomon Islands," the petition reads.

"The key thing is to make sure the public understands this issue. Ultimately Resorts World is a business. A business that must listen to the consumers. If the consumers become aware of this and they start to speak up then the business needs to change their decisions," said Ng, who is hoping that people will not buy tickets to see the dolphins.

The petition was launched on November 12, on the same day as the start of the campaign, which will be brought to various schools: Ateneo de Manila University on November 17-18, De La Salle University on November 14-19, and UP Diliman on November 24-25.

Trixie Concepcion of Earth Island Institute says they plan to file the petition by the end of the month, after the roadshows.

Enjoy nature

"Humans should stop thinking it is their right and privilege to have dolphins perform for them. They should stop thinking that the best way to view an animal is for it to be in a cage or in an enclosure. It's not a relationship if you're looking at it and it's performing against its nature," said Anna Gonzalez of the Wild Bird Club of the Philippines.

"With dolphins also, the other way around is if you take your kids out dolphin watching and you're also at a respectful distance. We hope that they also start enjoying all the other wildlife connected with the ocean, the coastlines, everything else in between," said Gonzalez, who believes birdwatching is a doorway to many nature-based activities.

"We believe that humans should have a more meaningful relationship with nature and not be the boss of it, but have an equal and interdependent relationship with nature... The best way to enjoy nature is by going out into it and not have some guy bring it to your doorstep and then you pay that guy," said Gonzalez.

At the campaign launch, the participating organizations distributed brochures to weekend shoppers, some of whom stopped for a while to look at the small exhibit. Others watched short films such as "The Dolphin Dealer," a documentary on Chris Porter, a former dolphin broker who eventually became an animal rights activist, and "Blood Dolphins," which features EII's Ric O'Barry, lead activist in the Oscar-winning film "The Cove."

"Visual methods are the most effective," said Saño, who admits that it is difficult to have a successful campaign. "The way the laws are interpreted it's not always favorable. That's the reality." - **YA, GMA News**