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Dolphin Activist O'Barry Visits Resorts World Sentosa

By Shibani Mahtani

The fate of 25 bottlenose dolphins owned by one of Singapore's two luxury casino resorts, Resorts World Sentosa, has captured the attention of more than just Singapore's animal activist community. Ric O'Barry, an American dolphin activist who was featured in the Academy Award-winning film "The Cove," flew to Singapore and tried to meet with higher-ups at the luxury resort Monday, but his request for a meeting was turned down.

Mr. O'Barry – who was once a dolphin trainer for the series "Flipper" – is in Singapore for a dialog on ending dolphin exploitation. An advocate of freeing the 25 dolphins currently held in the Philippines, he had petitioned Resorts World Sentosa a month ago, and made a trip to the company's corporate headquarters Monday.

When he was told that Chief Executive Tan Hee Teck and senior management weren't available to meet him, Mr. O'Barry handed his petition to another employee at RWS, according to local media reports. He joins Singapore-based animal-rights group Animal Concerns Research and Education Society, or ACRES, and U.S.-based online activist groups Avaaz and Change.org in mounting campaign against the treatment of the resort's dolphins. Online petitions started by the two groups have collected more than 800,000 signatures calling for the dolphins to be freed.

A statement from a spokesperson for the resort's Marine Life Park said that while they "welcome dialog with ACRES," they see "no reason to meet" Mr. O'Barry "whose agenda... is to release our dolphins."

The resort has showed no signs of acquiescing to the demands of the animal activists, who are adamant the dolphins be released. A Marine Life Park spokesperson insisted in a statement that the dolphins are doing well, and that they would be "gravely irresponsible" to consider reintroducing the dolphins to the wild.

The controversy began when ACRES reported the dolphins were caught from the Solomon Islands and transported to Langkawi, Malaysia, where two of them died. Resorts World has acknowledged the deaths, which it said were due to a waterborne bacterial infection that also afflicts animals in the wild and occurred despite efforts to save them.

Since then, the activists have continued to insist that the dolphins are held in poor conditions and are better off free.

Captions posted on a Facebook page set up by ACRES, "Save the World's Saddest Dolphins," described the enclosure as being "small and rusty," among other issues. The dolphins once "roamed free and wild" but now are "facing a life of captivity, boredom, stress, claustrophobia, frustration and slow death, thanks to Resorts World," the group says, according to its website.

The page has more than 17,000 fans on Facebook.

An "Open Letter" on the resort's Marine Life Park website states, "Rest assured, our dolphins will exercise and play to their heart's content, and will never be forced to do what does not come

naturally to them.” The website also refers visitors to an extensive frequently-askedquestions page that was recently updated with information about dolphin care and the park’s intentions.

Activists are continuing to turn up the heat on RWS. A group unrelated to ACRES has organized an event on Facebook, “Resorts World Sentosa: Stop the Shame,” urging people to call the resort on Oct. 17 to express their view that the dolphins be freed.

A spokesperson from the Marine Life Park responded by saying that while they welcomed constructive and civil feedback, they could not tolerate harassment to their employees or activities that would inconvenience the public. Early in September, RWS barred users from commenting on its Facebook page after what they described was “cyber-harassment” by animal activists.

ACRES’s Facebook page for its event reminded people to “keep the calls civilized” and “as short as possible.”