

The Online Citizen

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RWS can impact youths by admitting mistake – Anti-dolphin hunt activist Ric O’ Barry

By Howard Lee

Ric O’Barry, marine mammal specialist and the man behind the Academy Award winning film, “The Cove”, is in Singapore for a dialogue session on 4 October to talk about his work to end dolphin exploitation. As part of his visit, he also attempted to open a dialogue with Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) on returning their captured dolphins, headed for RWS’s marine park attraction, to their original home in the Solomon Islands.

O’Barry, formerly a highly successful dolphin trainer for the “Flipper” television series, had his lifechanging moment when one of the dolphins under his care died in his arms, whereupon he realised the error of attempting to confine and train dolphins. From then on, he has spent the last 40 years working to free dolphins around the world through his films and campaigns with local communities and authorities.

Barely hours of his landing in Singapore, I managed to call O’Barry for a tele-interview and got his views on his work, animal rights efforts in Singapore, and that ACRES has been doing.

Film and the Internet figured heavily in your projects. What are the benefits of the media that makes you want to use it?

The Internet and Facebook has changed everything, as corporations can no longer lie and get away. They will be exposed. What we capture on film is clear evidence that the capture of dolphins for conservation and research purposes is a lie. And we were able to reach millions through social media and get their signatures of support. Organisations used to be able to get away with their lies before the age of Internet. Now, they are just shown to be inherently hypocritical.

I see a lot of perseverance and dedication in what you do. Do you think you are a dying breed in the world?

I don’ think so. “The Cove”, for instance, has created thousands of activists. If I used to feel alone, I don’t anymore.

What have you heard of conservation and animal rights efforts in Singapore and what is your opinion of these efforts?

I only know of the one by ACRES to try and get the RWS dolphins back to the Solomon Islands. As part of our international campaign to save dolphins, they have my support and the support of millions. And I see that it is primarily a good thing for Singapore as a whole. If ACRES succeeds, it will be a positive windfall of publicity around the world for Singapore and for RWS, as people who care. Of course, the biggest winners will be the dolphins, as they get to return to their rightful home in the Solomon Islands.

What is your opinion on what RWS and the authorities have done so far?

I believe that RWS and the Singapore authorities can have an immeasurable impact on our youths by admitting they made a mistake and releasing the dolphins. RWS doesn't need to have wild dolphins in their marine park, it is complete and perfect as an attraction by itself.

Looking at your projects around the world, you must have been branded a "foreign interference" many times. I can assure you that such sentiments will be prevalent in Singapore. How would you respond to this?

The 25 dolphins do not have Singapore passports. They belong in the Solomon Islands. The capture and traffic of dolphins is an international problem, and we all have an equal responsibility to do them right.

What has been the role of governments in your projects, particularly where they have been part of the negotiation process? What do you hope to see from Singapore's government in the RWS dolphins case?

We are working with the Solomon Island authorities for a complete ban on the capture of wild dolphins. You, know, the Solomon Island people have been hunting dolphins for more than 450 years, and yet they can do this with us! Singapore has no reason to want the dolphins. I see my effort in the Solomon Island authorities as one of teach and learn – understand their position, but let them know that what they are doing is not sustainable. If the people of the Solomon Islands can stop, so can RWS and Singapore.

What will you say to the dolphin trainers and those tasked with working for RWS dolphin project? Bearing in mind that theirs is probably a job that puts food on the table.

They can be redeployed to train the dolphins, to help and prepare them for their return to the wild. It is a long term project that will take years, and there is no reason why they should not be able to do so.

Can we expect to see you here more often, helping ACRES campaign for RWS to let the dolphins go?

Yes. I fully support what ACRES is doing. If they need me, I will be here.