

## Asian Scientist

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### 'The Cove' Star Takes On Resorts World Sentosa In Bid To Free Captured Dolphins

By Juliana Chan

*AsianScientist (Oct. 6, 2011)* – In a public session that took place in Singapore this Tuesday, Ric O'Barry, dolphin activist and former trainer of Flipper the dolphin, became the modern David in an epic battle against the Goliath of resorts, Singapore's Resorts World Sentosa (RWS).

The event, which was sponsored by the Grand Copthorne Waterfront hotel, drew a crowd of more than 500 from all walks of life, including children, students, and educators.

They had come to hear O'Barry, star of the Academy Award-winning covert documentary film *The Cove*, speak on his latest campaign: for RWS to return a family of 25 wild-caught dolphins, slated to be the stars of its Marine Life Park, to their Solomon Island home.

Organized by an all-Singaporean local organization, Animal Concerns Research & Education Society (ACRES), the public session was part of a five-year effort to release the dolphins from captivity. But after five years of 'positive negotiations' and no concrete results, ACRES launched a campaign in 2011 to address this issue more intensively, said its executive director Louis Ng.

Seated with a large MasterCard poster in front of him that bore his name, O'Barry said that he was planning to cut up the sign in front of the large audience, but fortunately, MasterCard called in the nick of time pledging to cut off all promotional relationships with the Marine Life Park.

O'Barry, a long-time opponent of the dolphin export trade, first updated the audience on *The Cove*, where he and his team tracked the dolphin hunting drive in Taiji, Wakayama, Japan using underwater microphones and high-definition cameras disguised as rocks.

"We still have a lot to do in The Cove. Today, they captured and killed 30 dolphins. It is important to keep it in the news," he said, adding that his work is never finished despite global awareness about the Taiji dolphin hunt.

#### **O'Barry: These are dolphins with jobs.**

On the discussion of dolphins bred in captivity versus those caught from the wild, O'Barry said that dolphinariums submit an annual marine mammal inventory report (MMIR) on each dolphin. Whether bred or caught, the reports revealed that dolphins developed similar diseases and stresses in captivity.

"These are dolphins with jobs, animals that need to do tricks for food," he said.

Taking legal action was an option, O'Barry said, as the organization he is with – the Earth Island Institute – was filing a lawsuit to halt the export of dolphins from Subic Bay in the Philippines to Singapore.

Ng also debunked a myth that RWS could not break their legal commitment to the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), having signed a contract to import the dolphins.

“RWS says they cannot break their commitment on the dolphin contract. That is a lie. The contract is not set in stone, because RWS asked to be released from whale shark contract and they were approved (by MTI),” Ng said, referring to a proposed whale shark exhibit that was cancelled in 2009.

### **Ornamental dolphins.**

On the discussion of finances, the very day that O'Barry personally went to hand over a letter to the CEO of RWS (O'Barry was declined a meeting), the Resort spent a quarter of a million to place an ad celebrating World Animal Day, he said.

Calling them “ornamental dolphins,” O'Barry asked a rhetorical question, “For an organization that earned SGD\$500 million (US\$385 million) in pre-tax profits over the previous quarter (Q2 2011), why would they even need the dolphins?”

His suggestion: perhaps it was the prestige of having dolphin exhibits *à la* the Mirage in Las Vegas and the Atlantis in Dubai.

Ng also pointed out that RWS wanted to give a SGD\$5,000 (US\$3,850) donation to ACRES, but the amount was declined.

“They couldn't buy us over,” Ng said, to rapturous approval from the 500-strong crowd.

### **Teaching a dolphin to catch a fish.**

O'Barry tackled the theory that a dolphin could not be returned to a wild after living in captivity for a period of time. On more than one occasion, RWS had said that releasing a dolphin back into the wild was not an option, stating that it would be “gravely irresponsible to even consider that.”

“They can teach the same dolphin to catch a ball, but we can't teach them to catch a fish again in the wild? I'm not buying that,” O'Barry said, noting his past record of releasing captured dolphins.

Ng added that the dolphins were caught as a family minus lactating mothers and calves, which would make it easier for the dolphins to be released as a pod.

Instead of having the dolphins stay in an exhibition tank and perform tricks, why not retire the dolphins into a sea pen, where they could experience the rhythm of the waves and the currents of the sea, O'Barry asked.

### **Capturing dolphins to educate about conservation.**

RWS has previously said that the dolphins would provide a scientific and educational resource for marine scientists. It has also [teamed up with the Sea Research Foundation](#) to develop a marine environmental curriculum for students in Southeast Asia.

But dolphins are not happy living in a square box, O'Barry said, noting that the primary sense for dolphins is sonar. For a creature that depended on a multitude of sounds in a vast ocean, a concrete tank was pure sensory deprivation, he said.

“We are dealing with an optical illusion here – the dolphins are always smiling – but I can read their body language after 50 years of working with them. It is absolutely depressing and difficult to watch,” O'Barry said.

O'Barry said that he had been fielded questions by journalists regarding the New York Aquarium on Long Island, who argued that if not for the dolphins there, inner city kids would never get the chance to experience seeing a dolphin.

“These kids are not going to see a snow leopard. Are we going to the Himalayas to drag a snow leopard into the room for them?” O'Barry said to laughter and claps from the crowd.

“We have to teach our kids to control their desires. We do not need animals in captivity to enjoy them.”

Citing the example of the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, O'Barry said an aquarium did not need to have live dolphins to be successful. Japan has 50 dolphinariums, he said, because “cute is big over there,” but it was absurd that an aquarium needed to display dolphins to sensitize its population to protect them. For example, Taiji has a population of more than 3,000 people, he said, but only 48 people are involved in killing dolphins.

### **Organizational arrogance.**

As the conference drew to a close, a member of the audience asked a pointed question: had O'Barry ever met an organization as stubborn as RWS?

O'Barry said that they all were stubborn, but he had found RWS to be one of the most arrogant. Pledging never to give up, he vowed to carry this story to all media channels available to him.

“The solution is simple: do not buy a ticket to a dolphin show. If you wear ivory, you are aiding the demand. It is a simple supply and demand,” he said.