

The Straits Times

11th August 2011

More oppose plan for dolphin exhibit at Resorts World Sentosa

Two activist websites gather 800,000 signatures globally in petition to free 25 mammals

By Sandra Davie

MORE animal lovers both here and abroad have come out to oppose Resorts World Sentosa's (RWS) plans to exhibit wild-caught dolphins in its Marine Life Park.

Two United States-based online activist groups, Avaaz and Change.org, have gathered a total of nearly 800,000 signatures from members around the world, including Singaporeans.

They want RWS to free the 25 dolphins which were caught off the Solomon Islands, near Papua New Guinea.

Local animal protection group Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) launched a campaign three months ago asking Singaporeans to send in video petitions, and has attracted 13,800 supporters to its cause.

Asia for Animals, a coalition of 10 animal protection groups, has written to RWS, asking it to show proof of its claim that wild-caught dolphins thrive in captivity.

In May, dolphin rescuer Ric O'Barry, who shot to fame with his film on the capture and killing of dolphins in Japan, wrote to the integrated resort's chief executive Tan Hee Teck, urging him to show that RWS is a 'true steward of the environment' by freeing the dolphins.

The marine mammal specialist, 72, who works for US-based environmental group Earth Island Institute, also offered his help to rehabilitate the dolphins and release them back into the wild.

Yesterday, he said Mr Tan has yet to respond to his offer, but warned that the protest is likely to grow. 'It's 800,000 people now and it will keep growing as more people learn about the cruel practices involved in capturing the dolphins and keeping them in marine parks,' he said.

The activist, who investigated the dolphin hunts in the Solomon Islands for a television documentary last year, said the capture process is traumatic and violent.

'The dolphins are corralled into a cove by the villagers. The healthy ones are caught to be sold to aquariums but the others are speared, clubbed and stabbed to death.'

New York-based Avaaz, which has gathered almost 700,000 signatures on its petition, said RWS should not underestimate people power. Ms Brianna Cayo Cotter, a media campaigner for the online activist network, said it has more than nine million members and a proven success record.

'Our members' actions have been instrumental in a number of major victories, whether preserving a ban on international whaling or passing powerful anti-corruption measures,' she said.

RWS' plans to use dolphins and whale sharks in its park attracted criticism from animal lovers from the start.

In May 2009, it scrapped the plan to exhibit whale sharks, which can grow to more than 12m and weigh 15 tonnes, saying it might not be able to care for them. But it later said it would go ahead and use the dolphins, despite two dying last October from a bacterial infection.

Yesterday, when asked to respond to the growing protests, RWS spokesman Krist Boo said the 25 dolphins in the Philippines are thriving. 'It will be gravely irresponsible of us to contemplate any thought of letting our animals into the wild after three years in human care. Despite contrary claims, the track record for marine mammal releases is patchy at best.'

She added that the resort recognises animal lovers' concerns but suggested they should do independent research before they take on a cause.

She said RWS will provide people with more information on its blogs and website, and stressed that the Marine Life Park has been designed to meet international accreditation standards and already has a strong professional core team, including five vets.

But Acres president Louis Ng said all the best care and international rules in the world can never replicate the free and open oceans.

'If RWS truly believes that the remaining 25 wild-caught dolphins are happy in their current enclosures, then Acres asks that RWS open the enclosure gates,' he said.

'If the dolphins are truly happy then surely they will remain in the enclosure?'

He said Acres was not opposed to a marine park filled with species that take well to confined spaces, but dolphins roam large distances and should not be confined.

Mr O'Barry said his offer to rehabilitate and release the dolphins still stands. 'The dolphins can adapt to their home range where they were born much easier than the concrete, steel and glass tanks at the Marine Life Park.

'If Resorts World frees the dolphins, not only will it show good corporate citizenship, but it will also be a massive windfall of good publicity for them.