

## Yawning Bread

21 August 2011

### Abetting species extinction and animal suffering: Guilty

“We had to send volunteers out with hidden cameras to collect evidence,” Louis Ng told me. The Executive Director of wildlife protection organisation Acres was proud of the undercover work they did last year. “Then we met up with the Agriculture and Veterinary Authority (AVA) to present them with what we found. The resulting raid yielded the largest seizure to date of tiger parts.”

Every country needs to do its part in protecting endangered species. Even though there are no more tigers in Singapore — the last tiger sighted in Singapore was in Choa Chu Kang in the 1930s, according to an entry in Wikipedia — there are buyers of tiger parts in our society who drive demand for the trade which in turn makes illegal hunting profitable.

Here though, it sounds as if it’s the unpaid volunteers and NGOs who do the frontline investigation work for AVA.

Not only did Acres discover a total of 59 shops selling tiger parts, “but 52 of them openly displayed them on sale,” said Louis Ng. It was as if these shops, located all over the island, from Little India to Chinatown to the residential suburbs, had no fear of being checked by government officials. There were teeth, claws, skins, etc.

Mostly, buyers sought them out from a belief that having these parts on their bodies would offer supernatural protection. Traditional Chinese medicine also calls for some parts as ingredients.

Below are a tiger tooth and three pendants made with tiger claws, among many seized in the raids:

What’s the law here? Import and export of “scheduled species” requires a licence under the Endangered Species (Import and Export) Act. The term “scheduled species” includes parts of those species, not just the whole animal or plant. The list of species contained in the Schedule under this Act corresponds to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, commonly referred to by the acronym CITES, and which Singapore acceded to in 1986.

The tiger (*panthera tigris*) is listed under Schedule I, a list of species threatened with extinction, deserving the most stringent protection, and it is unlikely that AVA would issue any permits in its trade. The law provides for a fine of up to S\$50,000 for each species dealt with by the offender or or two years’ imprisonment.

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The current high-profile campaign that Acres is running is against the import of dolphins by Resorts World Sentosa (RWS). A concert is planned for Sunday 28 August 2011 — see details at the bottom of this article.

The case itself is explained on the website [www.saddestdolphins.com](http://www.saddestdolphins.com). Briefly, the background is this:

The casino resort is building a theme park where dolphins perform shows. To stock it, RWS bought 27 dolphins that Chris Porter had caught off the Solomon Islands in the Pacific, for US\$60,000 per mammal. Whether Porter had caught the dolphins on his own and then sold them to RWS, or whether the catch was commissioned by RWS is not known, but what RWS did is driving demand all the same.

Said Louis Ng: "We don't believe dolphins and whales should be kept in captivity. In some countries like Chile and Costa Rica, it is criminal. In other countries like the UK, marine parks have stopped this on a voluntary basis."

More disturbingly, these 27 dolphins "were caught from the wild with no population studies done." If one doesn't know how endangered the population was, how can one take animals away? Two of them have already died.

As the website informs us:

Dolphins are highly intelligent social creatures that live in pods, forming close bonds with family members. Humans visitors to marine aquariums often fail to see that the dolphins there had to have been ripped from their natural ocean environments, snatched away from their family and pod mates, held in nets, carried in trucks, hoisted into planes and flown for hours.

30% to 80% of dolphins die during the capture itself, mostly from drowning in the nets and from wounds sustained during the process. Others may die pretty soon after, from the stress, panic and trauma. Think about it this way. To bring a single dolphin into an aquarium, the captors may have caused the death of four of her pod mates.

[snip]

Dolphins in the wild are very curious animals and live in a world full of sounds, sights, movement, colour, varying landscapes and changing currents. Contrast this with the captive environment – often four walls in a land-based lagoon devoid of visual or auditory stimuli. There's nowhere to go except back and forth. And nothing to do except turn round and round.

The food is now dead fish, and it arrives in a bucket. The dolphins in concrete-walled pools face the worst hell of all, with their sonar bouncing back and forth deafeningly.

As soon as RWS announced plans for its marine park, Acres sought a dialogue. "We've met up with RWS for five years," Ng informed me. "Originally, their plan included a whale shark, but this idea was scrapped. However, while discussing about dolphins, they went ahead to buy them and didn't even tell us." This suggests insincerity in the dialogue.

Help was enlisted from Mexico where they too had a similar problem with a marine park. 28 dolphins were imported in 2003, but 12 are now dead when Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins can live for 30-40 years or more. Mexican Senator Jorge Legoretta Ordorica wrote to then-minister in charge of AVA, Mah Bow Tan, informing him of Mexico's experience, and saying, "With hindsight, the import should not have taken place".

The senator added: "Mexico's international reputation was damaged because of the negative publicity," urging Singapore not to take the same route.

According to Ng, Mah Bow Tan's reply was a general one, but the bottom-line was that the government still intended to allow RWS to import dolphins, issuing the necessary licences.

I hope the new minister Khaw Boon Wan would take a more moral stand. Clearly though, the campaign must now go public.

Here's the press release about the concert:

ACRES will be holding a first-of-its-kind concert to save the world's saddest dolphins. To be held on 28 August, the concert will see the largest-ever gathering of animal lovers at the Speakers' Corner, to urge Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) to release their remaining 25 wild-caught dolphins.

RWS continues to refuse to fail to specifically address the concerns raised by members of the public, with regard to the capture and confinement of dolphins. Despite repeated emails to RWS, they to date have yet to reply to all 25 questions raised by ACRES. RWS also continues to delete comments questioning their decision to house wild-caught dolphins and block users from their Facebook page.

Local and international support for the "Save the World's Saddest Dolphins" campaign is increasing exponentially, and ACRES believes that it is time all the animal lovers in Singapore came together and spoke as one.

ACRES, in collaboration with Young NTUC, is hosting a concert to raise awareness, to make ourselves heard and, most importantly, to show our solidarity with the dolphins. Several prominent bands and musicians, including Jack and Rai, Sixx, D'Fusion, Zal Empty, Alicia Pan and Michaela Therease are donating their time and talent for the dolphins' benefit.

"We hope that by being a part of this social movement, we play a role in helping to free the dolphins, and raise awareness about the ills that captivity brings to dolphins. Resorts World, please let the dolphins go" said Singapore musicians, Jack and Rai.

During the concert, members of the public will gather together to form the shape of a giant leaping dolphin for the cameras.

"It is time for RWS to respond positively to public concerns. It is time for RWS to show the world that they are truly responsible global citizens who not only care about their bottom line, but also for the sentient beings we share this world with" said Mr. Louis Ng, Executive Director of ACRES.

#### Event Details

Date: Sunday, 28 August 2011.

Time: 4:30 – 7.00 pm.

Venue: Hong Lim Park (Speakers' Corner), Exit A of Clarke Quay MRT.

For more details please log on to: <https://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=119284371501338>