

The Online Citizen

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Dolphins and captivity don't mix

By Elisabeth Aruldoss

In 2008, Resorts World Sentosa in Singapore bought 27 wild bottlenose dolphins from the Solomon Islands to be placed in a dolphin exhibition in their Marine Life Park in 2012. Nine of the dolphins were then transported to Langkawi and the rest were put in Subic Bay, Phillipines.

However, in 2010, two female dolphins that were put in a holding area in Langkawi died from a bacterial infection known as Melioidosis. Melioidosis is caused by the soil-dwelling bacterium *Burkholderia pseudomallei* and most commonly occurs when a wound comes into contact with contaminated soil and muddy water.

Following the deaths of the two dolphins, the other dolphins in Langkawi were then transported to the Philippines and are currently undergoing training in preparation for their arrival in 2012.

A similar event occurred in 2003, where 28 bottlenose dolphins from the Solomon Islands were imported to the Atlantida facility in Mexico for entertainment purposes in their Wet 'n' Wild Park.

However, at least 12 dolphins died within five years of the transport. One died as a result of stress a month after its arrival, and another six died in the next two years due to illnesses. Following this tragic outcome, the Mexican government implemented a ban on the exportation and importation of live cetaceans for entertainment uses.

THE PLIGHT

The surviving RWS dolphins will potentially face a life of suffering and their fate may be similar to that of the Mexican dolphins. It is important to consider the conservation and well-being of wildlife and therefore I do not believe that the RWS dolphins should be kept in captivity.

The public needs to know that the beauty of wildlife should only be observed in their natural habitat. The intelligence of dolphins is one that is rare in nature, and they should not be degraded for entertainment. The deaths that occurred in captive environments all over the world furthermore prove my point that the RWS dolphins cannot thrive in captivity.

Taken from RWS website and I quote "Research, public education and conservation efforts for marine life are the cornerstones of the Marine Life Park." The irony of it all is that while they uphold conservation as a key cornerstone, two unfortunate dolphins have already died under their care.

What kind of conservation are they promoting? How many more dolphins have to die before RWS gets the hint that they are leading these dolphins to misery? With much support and persuasion to abolish the dolphin exhibition in RWS, these dolphins can lead a life of freedom in the ocean where they belong.

IMPACTS OF CAPTIVITY

Captivity causes unstable relationships:

Dolphins cannot thrive in captivity. An oceanarium, no matter how big it is, cannot recreate the dolphin's natural habitat – the ocean[i]. It simply cannot provide the same social environment for these marine creatures.

Social relationships play a very important role in the well-being of dolphins[ii]. Unstable relationships usually lead to stress and aggression in dolphins[iii], and loss of social support results in increased stress and a higher risk of mortality[iv]. Unstable relationships often occur when dolphins are captured from the wild and thus stripped from their social groups. Also, the death of one or more pod mates, which has already occurred in the RWS dolphins, can result in further suffering for the pod group as dolphins are highly sociable creatures.

The dolphin groupings determined by humans are artificial and is different from the natural groupings in the wild. Dolphins that do not get along with the group will be isolated or try to escape confinement. A newly matured dolphin or an introduction of a new dolphin to the group affects the social hierarchies and relationships already in place[v]. This instability in the dolphin group can lead to an increase in the risk of injuries, illnesses and aggression between the dolphins[vi].

Captivity ignores behavioural needs and causes stress:

Wild dolphins are used to swimming forty to fifty miles a day and diving hundreds of feet. They are constantly swimming, looking for food and playing with their pod mates[vii]. Unfortunately, marine parks are just too small to cater to the dolphin's behavioural needs. The use of echolocation by dolphins for hunting and detecting objects is also severely limited in captivity.

Dolphins denied the ability to partake in their natural behaviour will exhibit stereotypical behaviours[viii], which are abnormal behaviours caused by psychological stress. Stereotypical behaviours are believed to be triggered by artificial environments that do not allow animals to meet their behavioural needs[ix].

Merely transporting dolphins can cause severe stress and many dolphins have died as a result of transport. According to WSPA, the risk of dying is increased six times during the first five days after capture. It is also found that 53% of captive dolphins, who have managed to survive the trauma of transport, die within the first three months of confinement.

Tragic outcomes:

Kathy the dolphin who played the character Flipper in the popular television series "Flipper" died in captivity in 1970. After the TV series ended, Kathy was put in a steel tank without much interaction with other dolphins and humans. Kathy slowly showed signs of stress and depression according to dolphin trainer Ric 'O' Barry. Eventually, while still the trainer's arms, Kathy sank underwater and did not swim up for another breath. As dolphins are not automatic air breathers they can chose to end their life if they find it too unbearable by simply not breathing. Kathy's death proves the extent of suffering dolphins can experience in captivity.

Here are some cases of dolphin deaths in captivity according to the Oceanic Preservation Society:

At the Miami Seaquarium in Miami FL, 62 dolphins have died from various diseases such as salmonella, toxic hepatitis and many others.

In Australia's Sea World enterprises, 16 dolphins have died from injuries such as spine fractures, twisted bowels, heart and mammary abscesses, "operating stress" and severe anemia.

The Orlando Sentinel performed a computer analysis of captive dolphins in the 1980s. They found that in the waters off Florida and other Gulf states, there were altogether 414 dolphins that were captured or born into captivity. However, over one third of these dolphins were dead by first January 1990.

Dolphins should be in captivity only for rehabilitation or conservation purposes but not for entertainment.

Yes, there are indeed some facilities that are focused on dolphin conservation and rehabilitation. But there are also many other marine parks that pose themselves as promoters of conservation; whose genuine intention is to build a money-making industry at the expense of their captive cetaceans.

Resorts World Sentosa certainly seems to be the latter. Besides the revenue it would earn RWS and enjoyment of visitors, no other benefit can be derived from the dolphin exhibition in Resorts World Sentosa Oceanarium. And more importantly, there will surely be detrimental impacts on the cetaceans' wellbeing.

Although there is an argument that dolphins in captive environments have increased life span compared to wild dolphins, one thing is clear; captivity severely reduces the dolphins' quality of life.

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