

Today

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Dolphins bound for RWS die, activists up in arms

By Esther Ng

SINGAPORE - Two of the seven bottlenose dolphins, which were destined for Resorts World Sentosa's (RWS) Marine Life Park, have died in a holding area at Langkawi.

The dolphins were caught from the wild in the Solomon Islands in January. Two females - one aged between four and five years and the other, around 10 - died from an acute bacterial infection of Melioidosis in October, said RWS spokesman Robin Goh on Friday. They were in "perfect health" previously, he noted. The remaining five have no signs of infection.

The virus, *Burkholderia pseudomallei*, can be transmitted through contact with contaminated soil and surface waters, with infections occurring primarily during the rainy season.

The deaths are set to reignite opposition to RWS' plans to house the animals as entertainers.

Marine conservationist Paul Watson told MediaCorp the "incarceration of dolphins lowers life expectancy of the animals".

"It's a trade based on blood and misery and has no place in the 21st century," said the founder and president of Sea Shepherd Conservation Society.

Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals executive director Deirdre Moss agreed: "This is a tragedy. The animals were obviously under tremendous stress ... If RWS could change its stand on whale sharks, why couldn't they on dolphins?"

Last year, RWS scrapped its original plan to exhibit whale sharks. Animal Concerns Research and Education Society founder Louis Ng hopes RWS will also "re-think" its decision to keep dolphins in captivity.

Marine Life Park is still under construction. Said RWS' Mr Goh: "We currently do not have a definite date for its opening, and likewise, details like animal configuration are also being finalised."

As for the 18 dolphins being trained at Ocean Adventure Park in the Philippines for the Marine Life Park, RWS said they were in "good health".

"We're continuing with the development and establishment of the medical, behavioural, husbandry and training programmes that include the preventive medicine programme

to ensure the well-being and health of the dolphins," said Mr Goh, who added that the Marine Life Park was "part of the bid" when RWS was awarded the integrated resort licence.

"We're committed to delivering the bid and the Marine Life Park that will not only boost tourism but research, conservation and education in marine mammals in this part of the region."

However, Ms Moss reiterated: "It's cruel to capture these animals from the wild with a view to entertain the public. We should promote tourism but not at the expense of these animals."

Bottlenose dolphins are listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which entail strict regulations in the trade of these mammals.

RWS has said previously it would comply with CITES.