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From dolphin 'Darth Vader' to activist

By Benson Ang

JUST two years ago, Mr Chris Porter, 40, considered the world's biggest dolphin broker, was reported to have sold 25 dolphins to Singapore's Resorts World Sentosa (RWS).

But the man who was once referred to as the "Darth Vader of dolphins" is now an animal activist.

After two of the dolphins he sold to RWS in 2008 died recently, Mr Porter has called for RWS to review its motivation for using these animals as a tourist draw.

His main beef: RWS is using the animals primarily to make money while telling the public that its aim is to educate the public on marine conservation.

Mr Porter wants RWS to be upfront with its intentions.

He told The New Paper in an e-mail: "I would like to see more information on the amount of direct conservation work RWS plans to do and the amount of direct impact its display will have."

By impact, he meant "not only for the economical benefit of Singaporeans, but also for the social benefit to wild dolphins".

Mr Porter was responding to The New Paper's queries after two bottlenose dolphins that RWS had planned to display in its upcoming Marine Life Park (MLP) died in October.

An RWS spokesman confirmed this and said that both dolphins were female.

One was under seven years old and the other was under 10 years old.

Both dolphins died from an acute bacterial infection that arose from contact with contaminated soil and surface waters, the spokesman added.

The two dolphins have been with RWS since January this year.

Because of the deaths, local animal group Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) has called for RWS to reconsider its decision to include dolphins in its park.

Mr Louis Ng, Acres' executive director, told TNP that he was "disappointed" that RWS would continue with its plan.

"What can RWS really teach its visitors about dolphin protection?"

"Would it not be an irony and contradiction for RWS to ask its visitors to protect dolphins when it obtained 25 individual dolphins from the wild and two have now passed away?" Mr Ng said.

"RWS must rethink its decision urgently. If Mr Chris Porter, a dolphin trader, can have a change of heart, then surely RWS can as well."

RWS currently has five dolphins in a holding area in Langkawi. Another 18 are being trained at Ocean Adventure Park in the Philippines, according to a report in Today newspaper.

These dolphins were caught from the wild in the Solomon Islands, near Papua New Guinea, by the Solomon Islands Marine Mammal Education Center and Exporters, which was owned by Mr Porter, the Solomon Star news website reported.

Mr Porter, who has been dealing in marine life for 21 years, felt that caring for animals in the industry has generally been buried under the red tape of companies and organisations.

Referring to both dolphin catchers and protesters, he said he felt that both sides tend to be more preoccupied with their own concerns and "the animals themselves are secondary".

Animal ambassadors

"These (animals) are ambassadors of their wild species for human benefit through education and display and profit.

"They should be treated as importantly as all ambassadors around the world."

Responding to Mr Porter's comments, an RWS spokesman told TNP via e-mail: "The MLP has consistently pledged its commitment to develop a facility that will set the standard in Asia for animal care, learning and education."

He explained that the MLP began conservation efforts even before it opened by launching the Marine Life Fund, worth S\$3.2 million, in May 2008 to help marine life-related research, education and conservation projects.

The spokesman said: "RWS has also undertaken coral conservation and today remains one of the few destination resorts in the world that does not serve sharks' fin soup in its restaurants."

On the death of its two dolphins, RWS said it did not announce the news immediately as it was awaiting conclusive pathology results.