

## **Our World Today**

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### **People power can release the 'world's saddest dolphins'**

*By Anna Gordon*

**A Singapore animal welfare organisation is continuing its campaign to use people power to push a casino and resort complex to release 25 wild dolphins facing a life of captivity.**

The Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES) said that Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) purchased 27 wild Indo-Pacific bottle-nose dolphins captured from the Solomon Islands in the Pacific Ocean in 2008 for an interactive dolphin spa program.

While waiting for their new enclosure at Sentosa, Singapore, some were kept in the Philippines, while others were transported to Langkawi, where two dolphins died from bacterial infection picked up in the wild.

Executive Director of ACRES, Louis Ng, said that while the campaign was launched publicly about three weeks ago, they have been discussing the issue for five years.

The 'Save the World's Saddest Dolphins' public campaign was launched after a failure to reach compromise with RWS in raising awareness through songs, videos and photos on their website [www.saddestdolphins.com](http://www.saddestdolphins.com).

The campaign has started to gain a great deal of local and international support.

"Internationally, there is the Royal Dolphin Conservation Society, International Animal Rescue, Royal Society for the Protection of Animals [and the] Singapore WWF," Mr Ng said.

Global online action group Avaaz has also picked up the campaign, currently recording over 630,000 petition signatures.

However, Mr Ng said that RWS is still to deliver any action in response to the public outcry and that he believes "they are calling for more dolphins."

The RWS Marine Life Park team said that personal encounters with animals have shown great impact on fostering awareness and advancing the protection of the species.

"We respect that there will always be divergent views regarding animals in zoological organisations, but we strongly believe that well-run facilities provide strong and inspiring messages to visitors and can make a tangible difference to animal conservation," RWS said in a statement.

"The Marine Life Park is committed to engage with all persons who share our goal: the conservation of the oceans and its inhabitants. Our commitment has not changed."

"A lot of people are getting a bit confused that we want to close the whole attraction down, but that is not what we are campaigning for," Mr Ng said.

“All we are saying is that we hope the Marine Life Park will do away without dolphins.”

Mr Ng said the focus of his campaign is only on the wild dolphins.

“I think if we look internationally, dolphins and whales are the only group of animals governments have banned in captivity.”

“Chile has banned it, Costa Rica has banned it [and] Mexico has passed legislation to ban using dolphins for entertainment.”

“These are animals that just don’t do well in captivity.”

Dr Lori Marino is a Senior Lecturer in Neuroscience and Behavioural Biology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

She has published over eighty papers in the field of animal behaviour, neuroscience and human-animal interactions, along with studying dolphins in captivity and the wild.

Dr Marino explained why captivity can be like an endless house of mirrors for wild dolphins as their sonar bounces off the enclosures.

“Sonar, or echolocation, involves emitting high frequency sound and receiving the echoes which bounce off objects in its path.”

“When a dolphin is in a tank with smooth walls there is no texture, no complexity, no way to differentiate one part of the tank from another with echolocation.”

“It is not only extremely monotonous but can be irritating because there is a constant barrier there off which sounds bounce. So, in that way it is like a house of mirrors.”

Dolphins in captivity also present a number of abnormal behaviours, including repetitive behaviour, self-mutilation, hyper aggression, lack of responsiveness and their stress hormones are unusually high.

“They are not able to perform natural social behaviours, because they have no choice about who to socialise with and cannot escape if they are not getting along with another dolphin,” Dr Marino said.

“All the natural mechanisms that exist for keeping a social group intact and healthy are non-existent in captivity.”

Dr Marino also said that while some dolphins die in captivity trying to escape their tanks, more often, depressed dolphins lose the will to live.

“Their immune system goes down and they stop eating and moving; and then they succumb to some kind of infection or stress-related disease.”

Mr Ng said that the dolphins already in Singapore display a lot of “bar-biting behaviours” or “just swim round and round”.

Life-spans of dolphins are also cut short in captivity.

Dr Marino said the best estimate of average and maximum lifespan for captive and wild bottlenose dolphins is about 25 and 45 years, respectively.

While she said that veterinary practices are sophisticated, there is no way to give the animals the quality of life that comes close to what they would have in the wild.

“Surviving is different from thriving,” she said.

Both Mr Ng and Dr Marino think that the Marine Park industry fuels dolphin hunting.

“If you now put a price on the head of a dolphin then people will obviously start to catch more once they know that there is a demand,” Mr Ng said.

“In many places around the world that demand is met by wild captures or taking animals from drive hunts,” Dr Marino said.

“The Taiji annual drive hunt is the largest supplier of dolphins and small whales to the captivity industry.”

“The marine parks pay a hefty price (about \$250,000 per dolphin) to the hunters to drive the animals into the killing cove where they choose individuals to take back with them to captivity.”

Dr Marino said that the dolphin and whale meat is on the way out and if the marine parks would stop taking from the drives, they would probably end.

Dr Marino also said that there is no scientific evidence that dolphin assisted therapy is effective.

“It is pseudoscience and exists to exploit people and dolphins,” she said.

Mr Ng said that a major misconception about the emotions of dolphins in marine parks is that they are always smiling.

“Their mouth is fixed in a permanent smile so people that go to marine parks think they are having a good time, but actually they’re not,” he said.

Dr Marino suggests that the average person can help dolphins living in captivity by not buying tickets to marine parks with dolphin and whale shows.

“The bottom line for these places is money... The general public has more power than they think.”

“They need to wield this power by sending a message to these places that they aren’t going to pay to see tormented animals anymore.”