



## June 2007

### FREE THE SOLOMON ISLAND DOLPHINS

If you look on a map of the Pacific Ocean, above and to the right of Australia you will see the Solomon Islands, a small group of islands that gained independence from Britain in 1978.

It is from these tiny islands that Chris Porter, a former sea-lion trainer, began a business capturing and exporting wild dolphins. Dolphin pens were set up on the tiny Solomon island of Gavutu.

#### Captures for captivity

Porter's first capture in 2003 caused international controversy. At least 100 dolphins were caught. Using local fishermen the dolphins were netted, flopped into the bottom of an open boat and taken, dry and gasping, on a journey of over an hour to the holding pens.

28 of them were sold to Parque Nizuc in Cancun, Mexico, for the increasingly popular activity of swimming with dolphins. The dolphins' journey took over 17 hours. They were tipped into six sea corrals measuring 10ft x 60ft and about 10 ft deep. A complete contrast to their former ocean home. For several days they made eerie, high-pitched screams, associated with stress and within a week of the transfer, a 15 year-old female had died. Post mortem results show she had

stomach ulcers. Ric O'Barry, a former dolphin trainer turned campaigner explained how it must have felt from the dolphin's point of view: abducted by aliens and transported to the park in a UFO. No wonder they were traumatized.

Ric O'Barry had first-hand experience of dolphin captures – he caught more than 100 dolphins himself before he became sickened by the practice. This happened when one of the five dolphins who played 'Flipper' in the famous TV series died in his arms.

#### Tuna boycott

Environmentalists and animal activists from around the world protested at this huge capture. Ric O'Barry and Earth First were foremost amongst them. Earth First wields vast influence in the tuna industry, acting as unofficial police to ensure the tuna are caught in dolphin-friendly ways. If fishing operations occur in an accredited manner, companies are permitted to use the Institute's dolphin-safe logo on their product, potentially adding millions of dollars to sales. In 2004, Earth Island's pressure forced the companies that purchased the tuna catch from the Solomons' fishing company, Soltai, to back off unless live dolphin exports were stopped. Facing damage to the industry, the Solomon Islands government declared a ban on export of dolphins in November 2005.

But now it seems that Porter has found a loophole in the legislation and is exploiting it. It appears this ban covers only the export of dolphins *from* the islands and does not include captures destined for the local market.

#### The captures

We need to put a stop to these captures. The numbers of dolphins involved may seem small when set against the thousands killed for meat, or by pollution or caught in fishing lines. However, if the ban on export is over-turned, the numbers captured will grow. And even if the capture is only allowed for dolphinaria in the Solomon Islands, this is little comfort for the individuals who will end their lives in sea pens just yards from their ocean homes. Some may die quickly from stress; some may starve - they are hunters of fish, not scavengers, and will not eat the defrosted dead fish they are fed on; others may die of stress-related diseases later.



Chris Porter feeding dead fish to a once skilled hunter. Note the shallowness of the sea pen

For those that survive, what does their future hold? The seeming-playful tricks they are trained to perform in the dolphinarium, and the seeming-smile design of their mouths ensures visitors leave the show feeling cheerful and guilt-free. Surely no suffering there. But if the visitors were allowed to hang around between shows and saw the listless circling, the smile hidden beneath the chlorinated water, they may feel differently about the industry their tickets had helped fund, and the incentive it gives to these small operations at the less regulated end of the market.

### **Dolphins should be free**

This is not some hippy dippy statement. The very nature of these animals makes them uniquely unsuited to confinement. In the wild, whales and dolphins live in large groups (called pods), often in tight family units. Family bonds often last many years. In some species, they last for a lifetime.

Whales and dolphins travel long distances each day, sometimes swimming in a straight line for a hundred miles, other times remaining in a certain area for hours or days, moving several miles along a coastline and then turning to retrace their path. These marine mammals can dive up to several hundred metres and stay underwater for up to half an hour. They spend only 10 to 20% of their time at the surface, while in captivity, with nothing at the bottom of their shallow homes, the reverse becomes the norm.

These animals, who are perpetually aware, have nothing like the varied stimulation of their natural environment. In perpetual motion, they are forced into literally endless circles. Life for these animals is a mere shadow of what it was in the wild.

And the act of capturing betrays the trust of dolphins in particular, who often come to play at the bow of the capture boat, only to be netted and hauled aboard, an incredibly traumatic ending to an innocent and joyous behaviour.

### **The dolphin pens on Gavutu**

Since the facility was established in 2003, several dolphins have died, either in the pens or in catching operations. Some were killed by a mysterious bug that came with some refrozen fish; a dozen spotted dolphins, a species which has never survived in captivity, simply pined to death; one escaped and was killed by sharks. Last year, four more dolphins starved just metres from the open sea when a cyclone cut their fish supply. "I call it a ghetto for dolphins," says Ric O'Barry. "They are floating there like coconuts, and that's because they have nothing to do in the pens."

Last April a reporter from America's *Time* magazine visited Gavutu. There he saw the 20 dolphins squeak softly and roll over to eyeball their captors as they swam monotonous laps around three tennis court-sized ponds.

No-one knows what has happened to those 20 dolphins; it is not easy to get visits to the facility, but the dolphin park wound down amid accusations that the dolphins died of malnourishment.

Now it seems that the dolphin park is getting a new lease of life as a further 20 dolphins have been captured and destined to a life of confinement far removed from the ocean home and their extended family and friends.

### **What you can do**

1. Please contact the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands. Express your concern that these captures have been allowed to proceed despite the ban, and urge the Solomon Islands government to demand the immediate release of the captured dolphins. Say it is very important the export ban is not overturned and ask that the ban applies to domestic captive dolphins too. Point out that a boycott of fish from the country's important tuna industry may result if these captured dolphins are not released.

#### **Write to:**

Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare  
Department of the Prime Minister & Cabinet,  
PO Box G1, Honiara, Solomon Islands  
Email: amaesulia@pmc.gov.sb

2. Please contact the Fisheries Minister Mr Nollen Leni. Express regret that talks about a boycott of Solomon Island fish is being mooted, as the many Solomon Islands fishermen using dolphin-friendly fishing methods are to be congratulated. However, point out the capture of wild dolphins for captivity is not 'dolphin-friendly'. Urge him to call for a ban on the capture of dolphins for captivity for export and for domestic purposes.

#### **Write to:**

Mr Nollen Leni  
PO Box G13, Honiara, Solomon Islands.  
Email: nollen.leni@yahoo.com.au

#### **Thank you.**



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\*Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species