



Fact sheet: Dolphins in captivity

Introduction

At least 19 species of cetacean (whales, dolphins and porpoises) are currently held in captivity around the world. The species most commonly kept in captivity is the bottlenose dolphin, *Tursiops truncatus*.

The bottlenose dolphin's rise to fame was no doubt propelled by the hit 1960's TV show *Flipper*. Filming was stopped when the dolphins that played Flipper became highly aggressive¹. The dolphins' former trainer, Richard O'Barry, puts this aggression down to the stress of confinement. Triggered by the death of one of the dolphins in his arms, Richard denounced the keeping of dolphins in captivity, and now devotes his life to campaigning for their freedom.

"Dolphins are free-ranging, intelligent and highly complex marine mammals. They belong in the oceans, not playing the clown in our human schemes."

- **Richard O'Barry**, Marine Mammal Specialist for the Earth Island Institute



There are currently over 800 bottlenose dolphins in captivity around the world. While there are **no** captive dolphins in the UK there are reportedly over 700 captive bottlenose dolphins in the USA, Mexico and the Caribbean alone. Many dolphinaria and zoos with dolphins are situated in popular tourist resorts such as Florida, Cancún and the Bahamas.

Florida has become one of the world's top tourist destinations, with 76.8 million visitors in 2004.² Captive dolphins have become a key commodity in tourist resorts such as Florida. Since opening in 1973, Sea World in Orlando has been visited by more than 80 million people.³ **A single, trained bottlenose dolphin can be worth over \$100,000 and generate \$1,000,000 a year for the marine park exhibiting it.**⁴

In a 1996 MORI Poll, **85% of people surveyed in the UK agreed that it is unacceptable to keep whales and dolphins in captivity.**⁵ However, swimming with dolphins is a dream harboured by many. In fact, 81% of adults surveyed in the USA expressed an interest in swimming with captive dolphins.⁶

Capture

Although dolphins have bred in captivity, the infant mortality rate is high and captive dolphin populations are currently **not self-sustaining**.⁷ Dolphins are imported from the wild in order to maintain the captive dolphin industry.

Methods of capture and transport of dolphins can be extremely cruel and some dolphins die of shock in the process.⁸

Bottlenose dolphins are protected under CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) Appendix II, which means that they **may become threatened with extinction unless trade is closely controlled**. In 2003 it was decided that bottlenose dolphins removed from the wild in the Black Sea and traded for primarily commercial purposes may no longer be exported.⁹

Japanese Dolphin Drives

Every year thousands of dolphins and small whales are hunted in the 'oikomi-ryo' (traditional dolphin drive) in Japan. Pods of dolphins are chased into shallow water or out to sea until they are exhausted. The pod is then surrounded by large nets and hauled in. This process is extremely traumatic to dolphins and many die from shock, stress and suffocation through becoming entangled in the nets.¹⁰

Some of these dolphins are selected for the captive industry and the remainder are slaughtered for human consumption in Japan. Out of a group of 100 dolphins captured in a dolphin drive in Taiji, Japan, in 2004, **more were sold into captivity than were slaughtered for food**.¹⁰ The drive clearly took place to satisfy demand from the captive dolphin industry, rather than for food.

Solomon Islands

During 2003, as many as 200 bottlenose dolphins were caught by local fishermen in the waters off the Solomon Islands. The dolphins were rounded up by fishing boats and caught in nets. The netted dolphins were dragged out of the water onto the boats and transported to shallow sea pens, a journey which reportedly took over two hours. It is believed that at least four dolphins died in the holding pens and it is likely that many more drowned in the nets during capture. Buyers from captive dolphin facilities all over the world are reported to have travelled to the Solomon Islands in order to purchase these wild dolphins for training in marine parks, including Mexico, Japan, Thailand, Taiwan and Italy. Twenty eight of these dolphins were sent to Cancún, Mexico, for display at Parque Nizuc.¹¹

Captivity

- **Substantial scientific studies into the effect of captivity on dolphins have implied that confinement is detrimental to their welfare.** Dolphins are very intelligent, self-aware¹² animals. The stress of confinement often results in behavioural abnormalities, illness, lowered disease resistance and premature death.¹³
- **Wild dolphins are far-ranging, fast-moving, deep-diving predators,** often swimming over 50km a day.¹⁴ Captive dolphins can never achieve this freedom of movement.
- **Captive dolphins are often held in small, barren tanks.** Most countries have no enforced minimum enclosure size for captive cetaceans. US regulations only require that enclosures are 7.32 metres long and 1.83 metres deep.¹⁵
- **Captive dolphins are not able to perform their natural foraging behaviour.** Wild dolphins spend a large amount of their time hunting and eat a wide variety of prey.¹⁴ In captivity they are fed on dead fish.
- **Captive dolphins are kept in unnatural social groups.** This can cause aggression and psychological distress, with health consequences including loss of appetite and gastric ulcers.¹⁶ Wild bottlenose dolphins live in ever-changing social groups, often characterised by dispersal and migration.¹⁴ The captive environment is fundamentally unable to provide for these complex social needs.
- **Dolphins can be highly aggressive towards members of their own species.** In particular, male bottlenose dolphins often fight and have been known to knock one another unconscious.¹⁷ Captive social groupings make it impossible for a dolphin to escape from an aggressive group-mate.
- Despite the constant food supply and lack of predation provided by a life in captivity, **captive dolphins do not live any longer than their wild counterparts.**¹⁸ Until very recently, life expectancy for captive dolphins was shorter than that of wild dolphins.¹⁸ Early mortality of captive dolphins is often linked to immunosuppression and increased susceptibility to infection and disease, caused by the constant stress of confinement and unnatural social groupings.^{7,13}

“The mortality for captive dolphins is 100%. None of them will get out alive.”

- **Richard O’Barry**, Marine Mammal Specialist for the Earth Island Institute

- **Dolphins are adapted to a saltwater environment, yet in captivity they are often kept in chlorinated tanks.** The use of chlorine in water used by

humans, such as in swimming pools, is kept to a strict minimum as higher levels cause skin and eye irritation. In the USA, there are no minimum or recommended levels of chlorine for use in marine mammal exhibits **because there is a lack of information of the effects of chlorine on dolphins.**¹⁹ Many dolphins spend their entire lives in these tanks.

- Dolphins are usually trained through the use of food rewards to perform **circus-style, demeaning tricks** which are not, as often claimed by dolphinariums, extensions of natural behaviour. These tricks can often be highly dangerous for the dolphins; in 2006 a bottlenose dolphin at Minnesota Zoo died after fracturing his skull when made to jump out of his tank during a training exercise.²⁰



“Dolphins do not perform because they enjoy it”

- **Doug Cartlidge**, former dolphin trainer

There are no international welfare standards for the management of cetaceans in captivity.

Standards and regulations governing captive dolphins differ widely, depending on the legislation within the country in which they are kept.

There are no captive cetaceans in the UK. In principle, it is not illegal to keep cetaceans in this country, but the standards of care outlined under the Zoo Licensing Act of 1981 are so strict that no establishment in the UK is currently able to meet them.

In the USA the Animal Welfare Act, enforced by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), sets standards for the management of captive marine mammals including enclosure size, water quality, food quality and handling.

Some countries, such as Singapore, rely solely on guidelines, which are not legally enforceable.

Organisations such as the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums do stipulate minimum housing standards for members holding captive cetaceans. However, membership of such organisations is not compulsory.

How YOU Can Help

- Do not support captive dolphin facilities by visiting them.
- Have you heard about dolphins being captured or a new facility? Please report it online at www.bornfree.org.uk/zoocheck/complaints.htm
- Adopt an orca through The Born Free Foundation at www.bornfree.org.uk

- Support ecotourism and see wild whales and dolphins with a responsible tour operator - visit www.wdcs.org/whalewatching.

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