

Arguments against captivity

Why keeping whales and dolphins in captivity is cruel...

Captivity severely compromises a whale or dolphin's quality of life. In the wild, they have complex social lives which cannot be recreated in captivity.

Dolphins have been kept in terrible conditions; for such a graceful, wide-ranging social animals no holding pools can be adequate. Similarly, no-one should be fooled by the attractive backdrops which some dolphinariums add to their pools. This is purely for our benefit not the dolphins.

Bottlenose dolphins are particularly famed for their friendly faces; however, this 'smile' can mask depression, stress and frustration. There are numerous cases of whales and dolphins displaying aggression towards humans and other dolphins in captivity. During aggression between dolphins there is nowhere to escape to; as a result struggles often end with injuries. This is rarely seen in the wild.

Current conservation philosophies around the world focus on saving natural habitats: removing dolphins from the wild is contrary to this philosophy.

The survival rate of captive-born whale and dolphin calves is lower than those in the wild. Any arguments presented by marine parks that they are involved in breeding programmes are without foundation. Their primary reason for achieving a successful breeding programme is to maintain a supply of performing animals, as regulations gradually make it more difficult to capture wild dolphins.

Aside from all these reasons, WDCS considers it immoral and unethical to imprison these wonderful creatures. This stance is increasingly being reflected in public opinion, for example; in the UK the findings of a 1996 MORI Poll demonstrated that 85% of those surveyed thought it 'unacceptable' to keep whales and dolphins in captivity. The main reasons quoted were: 'it's not natural' and 'they should be swimming freely in the sea'.

Tracking captive dolphins and their suppliers...



Captive dolphins in "petting pools" often sustain injuries from sharp objects or through competition for food.



A performing Orca at Sea World in San Diego. Captive whales and dolphins have a substantially shorter life expectancy than their wild counterparts.

It is almost impossible to track accurately the movements of captive dolphins from facility to facility. Some dolphins travel miles in their performing life, for example, "Sheryl", a Black Sea bottlenose dolphin, was held in Russia and then transported to Argentina in 1991. She ended up in a South American traveling circus and finally died in Colombia in 1997. Dolphins

follow suit. Nowadays, when you visit a dolphinarium, you pay to see the show, pay to pet the dolphins, pay to feed the dolphins or even pay to swim with them. Once you have experienced all of that, there is a club to join and numerous souvenirs and toys to buy. Suddenly, you will have been parted from all your money, without even realizing it!

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Petting Pools...

Petting Pools usually comprise a group of dolphins competing to be fed small dead fish by tourists. All of the SeaWorld parks in America now have these 'attractions'. The popularity of Petting Pools as another way of extracting money from the excited tourist is particularly concerning for a number of reasons. WDCS has witnessed: over-fed, fat dolphins in these pools; dolphins biting people in their attempt to get the fish; tourists cruelly teasing dolphins, and people dropping inappropriate objects into the pool, such as sunglasses and beer.

Furthermore, some of the fish fed to the dolphins may become contaminated through man-handling and falling to the floor and it is also difficult to regulate the amount of food fed to the dolphins. The petting pool concept sends conflicting messages to the visiting public, as zoos normally strictly prohibit the feeding of animals.

Swimming with dolphins...

Many people have a desire to 'swim with' dolphins. This is providing dolphinariums with yet another way of increasing revenue. Again, as it is cruel to keep dolphins to perform, it is cruel to enforce interactions

captured in Cuba have ended up in Germany, Spain, Italy, Switzerland and many other countries across Europe, South America, Asia and the Caribbean.

The expansion of the 'dolphin show'

The United States, Canada, Central and South America, Asia, the Middle East and some European countries continue to actively promote dolphin shows. However, it is the US that has been particularly effective in finding new ways to develop the show to increase revenue and encouraged other countries to

with humans day after day. There is also a concern that there may be disease transmission between dolphin and human, plus the danger of potential aggressive behaviour, which has been documented.

The expansion of the swim-with programme: “dolphin therapy”

Dolphin interaction programmes, from touching and feeding to swimming with dolphins are increasing in range and popularity. Love for dolphins may encourage members of the public to want to get close to them. This desire may stem from the belief that close contact with these special animals can provide, at the very least, a spiritual release from day to day stresses and boredom and at the other extreme some sort of miracle cure for disease and mental illness. Such beliefs have helped encourage the growth of interaction programmes by both commercial interests and alternative therapists.

WDCS is increasingly concerned about the growing number of so-called Dolphin Assisted Therapy (DAT) programmes in the United States, Latin America and elsewhere.

We are currently reviewing details of existing and proposed DAT programmes and have investigated whether “benefits” claimed by or on behalf of patients using this kind of therapy are equivalent to those claimed in less controversial interactions with puppies, horses and other domesticated animals. You will find our report on these spurious programmes within this site but we would be interested to hear your views and perhaps your personal experiences with all kinds of animal assisted therapy. Please write to us at info@wdcs.org

WDCS has a series of well-substantiated concerns about interactions between humans and dolphins in captivity and, indeed, in the wild. These concerns, relating to the welfare of humans as well as dolphins, apply equally to dolphin assisted therapy. They include the welfare of the animal; the risk of aggression

towards people; the potential for disease transmission from human to dolphin or vice versa; the fact that dolphins may be forced into interactions with humans and have little refuge or respite from these actions and the fact that in so many DAT and other interaction programmes, dolphins are captured from the wild and/or transported thousands of miles to suffer the effects of confinement in captivity.

Dolphins are large, strong animals perfectly adapted to the conditions of the open ocean. Held in a confined space and subjected to forced interaction with humans, aggressive behaviour can have serious consequences. A recent study carried out by WDCS into dolphin/visitor interactions at marine parks in America records many incidents of aggressive behaviour by dolphins towards human visitors such as threats, biting and butting. This study also raises serious concerns regarding the potential for the

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transmission of disease between human visitors and dolphins.

Inadequate regulations exist in relation to interactions between captive dolphins and members of the public. WDCS is bringing its concerns and evidence to the attention of relevant governments and other interested parties, who must address the potential consequences for both humans and dolphins of these interaction programmes.



Interactions between dolphins and humans in swim-with programs are forced with little regard to the animal's welfare.

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Dispelling the myth that scientific research is a justification for captivity....

Marine parks continue to argue that they play an important part in marine mammal research. This is one of the widely-used justifications for captivity. Parks claim to provide the general public and science with useful knowledge. However, a WDCS review of scientific research in dolphinariums throws serious doubt on these claims, as this research has little relevance to the conservation of free-living whales and dolphins.

The debatable value of captive research can be easily demonstrated. There are many papers published on training techniques which have no relevance to conservation. Disease studies on captive dolphins have identified what diseases and parasitic burdens are present. However, this knowledge cannot be applied usefully in the wild, as captive dolphins live in an artificial environment and are fed with various drugs, which alter their body chemistry. Knowledge from captive studies of disease has also contributed nothing to preventing or predicting the recent outbreaks of viruses in wild dolphin populations, which can cause mass mortalities.

Basic reproductive information on pregnancies and sexual maturity has been obtained for some species in captivity. It would be dangerous to apply this information directly to the conservation and management of wild populations as it may over-estimate their reproductive capacities. Feeding has a marked effect on these areas and the unnatural composition of zoo diets means that their natural growth patterns may be different. Studies conducted on whale and dolphin behaviour in captivity do not have the potential to improve the conservation of wild cetaceans, as captive animals' lives are artificial. They follow the same basic routine rather than the varied daily movements of a free-living cetacean.

For these reasons, WDCS does not consider captive research valid to the conservation of whales and dolphins in the wild.

Do dolphinariums fulfill a valid educational role?

Many dolphinariums claim that they are playing an important role in educating people to appreciate the marine environment, and in fact, some regulatory



Marine parks often claim that they play an important role in educating the public, but the displays bear little resemblance to the reality of the oceanic environment.

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The complex lives of dolphins cannot be represented by trained 'jumping and splashing' for paying visitors.

bodies require dolphinariums to demonstrate an 'educational value' to their displays. WDCS believes that marine parks significantly distort the public's understanding of the marine environment. Educational messages take second place to the whale and dolphin performances, where the "jumping" and "splashing" are the main feature. Any educational aspects are lost amidst the glamour and excitement. Similarly, the complex nature of the lives of whales and dolphins cannot possibly be demonstrated in a tank.

Some marine parks also distort the real truth behind captivity by using different words. For example, whales and dolphins are 'acquired' rather than 'captured'; captives do not live in tanks, they live in 'controlled environments'. Such terminology only serves to distract the visitor's eye from the reality of tanks and repetitive daily routines.

It is easier now than it ever has been to see whales and dolphins in the wild. This experience cannot be improved upon for excitement and education. Imagine going out on a trip as a child. You will learn about whales and dolphins in their natural habitat and you will see their natural behaviour. You will also learn about the boat, about the ocean and the other creatures which live in it. The experience will teach you that, as a human, you cannot and should not control or tame everything: an important lesson in conservation.

WDCS has produced two in-depth reports (see related pages) covering the main arguments against keeping whales and dolphins in captivity. There are three commonly used justifications by the captivity industry to keep whales and dolphins and deflect attention away from the real financial incentive and the issue of welfare: Education, Conservation and Scientific Research.

These reports have proved valuable resources for individuals and groups campaigning against the captivity of whales and dolphins.

Common responses to criticism from dolphinariums...and the WDCS counter arguments...

'Our animals are happy'...Dolphins have a natural smile on their face, they also die smiling.

"The seas are polluted and dangerous, here

they are protected'...Whales and dolphins have evolved over millions of years to live in the ocean, it is their natural habitat. The way to solve pollution and other environmental problems is to tackle the point sources of pollution, not take species out of the seas.

"Why are people campaigning against captivity when there are other more endangered species that need protecting?"...WDCS funds cetacean research and conservation on many endangered species. WDCS also protects the individual cetacean as well as cetaceans in the wild. The captivity campaign is just one small facet of the work we do.

'Whales and dolphins in captivity have forgotten how to live in the wild'...Dolphins have been successfully released into the wild. Whales and dolphins are intelligent creatures, if they can learn tricks that aren't necessary for survival then they can learn how to be wild again. ■

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