

Dolphins exploited for military purposes

It sounds like bad science fiction, but the US military is using dolphins to detect mines in war zones and intruders to naval bases.

Dolphins have been used by the military mainly since the cold war, due to their extraordinary capabilities and use of echolocation. The dolphins used in Iraq in recent years are reported to form part of a wider unit of dolphins and sea lions that have been trained by the US to detect mines and even enemy divers.

Military dolphins are confined in captivity, which can cause them extreme mental and physical stress. This suffering has been revealed in dolphins kept in marine parks and dolphinariums through aggression, lower life expectancy and higher infant mortality than in the wild.

The US-Navy are reported to have trained dolphins to patrol harbours to report any unusual occurrences to their trainers, to detect and mark objects such as mines and probably to plant mines on ships. It is also assumed, although denied by the Navy itself, that dolphins have been trained to attack foreign divers and kill them. This could be practiced for example by placing equipment over the animals head with a carbonic acid bullet linked to an injection needle which is released when the diver comes into contact with the dolphins beak.

Meanwhile dolphins from the US Navy have been used in various parts of the world such as in the Baltic Sea (LINK to Import of Military Dolphins to Germany), Alaska, Hawaii, Florida, the Persian Gulf, Vietnam and were recently used in the Iraq war. It is believed that the animals are trained for special tasks, not any animal is trained to perform all activities. The animals are deployed from ships and helicopters. It is assumed that the infrastructure of modern vessels therefore has to be set up to make the handling, care and transport of these animals possible, an expensive effort.

Bottlenose dolphins and other marine mammal species have been used by the navy of the former Soviet Union. The animals may have been used for similar purposes as by the US Navy. Additionally perverse manoeuvres such as to para drop dozens of dolphins from planes into fresh water lakes have



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Bottlenose dolphins are one of the most intelligent species on Earth, and have echolocation capabilities far exceeding anything man-made.

been adopted, to test the adaptability of dolphins to extreme situations. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the military programs involving dolphins to that extent ended, as the financial situation collapsed. To obtain foreign currencies it wasn't a huge step to become involved in the dolphin-show business. The former "killer-dolphins" became reprogrammed to jump

"...perverse manoeuvres such as to para drop dozens of dolphins from planes..."

through hoops. Dead fish was now fed to the dolphins as a reward for playing basketball or performing other tricks, rather than for detecting mines. Because of the high mortality rate involving captive dolphins, the former military holding pens still provide the base for the capture and training of these marine mammals.

In 1998, WDCS published a report documenting the extent of the trade with dolphins originating from the Black Sea. In November 2002 WDCS celebrated the success of the decision by the Parties to CITES (Convention on the International Trade with Endangered Species) to set a 0-quota for the commercial trade with bottlenose dolphins originating from the Black Sea. This actually bans the commercial

trade of these animals. An important victory for the conservation of this geographically isolated population.

The use of marine mammals for military operations means lots of transports and therefore stress to the animals. The animals get transported quite often and within quite short periods of time thousands of kilometres from one location to the other. This is a further threat to their survival. Little is known about the danger caused through the manoeuvres themselves, as most are undertaken under strictest confidentiality. Ralf Breier & Joerg Reiter report in their book "Delphingeschichten" (1992) that six dolphins from the US Navy were transported to the Persian Gulf to detect mines. One of the animals is reported to have died during the operation.

Notwithstanding the possible risk caused by the manoeuvres, it has to be kept in mind that dolphins used for military purposes are confined in captivity and therefore their average life span, but mainly their quality of life is greatly reduced. To continue this practise further animals will be caught from the wild in the long-term, an unacceptable practise. WDCS is campaigning to end the use of marine mammals for military purposes.

Trade in Bottlenose dolphins from the Black Sea

The international trade of bottlenose dolphins originating from the Black Sea, has mainly been organised out of the Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Former military bases are used to train and then export the animals. In the past few years other countries such as Bulgaria and Georgia which stopped



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Captivity induces high stress levels in cetaceans, as evidenced by their staggeringly high mortality rate.

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the capture and export were involved in the trade as well. The exported animals are mainly sent to zoos and amusement parks in various countries around the world. The exports are of pure commercial nature.

In May 1998 WDCS published “The Dolphin Traders” (Cartledge & Entrup, 1998), the first report documenting the extent of the trade involving Black Sea dolphins. The data become actualized continuously. Between 1990 and 2000 at least 135 dolphins are documented to be exported. The animals were transferred to Argentina, Chile, Columbia, Hungary, India, Israel, Malta, Romania, Turkey, etc. in some of the cases illegally. Since the mid 1990s the number of animals involved has increased and continues to do so. While WDCS has in some cases campaigned successfully to close dolphinariums which displayed Black Sea dolphins and prevented further imports, e.g. in Cyprus and India, a major victory has been celebrated at the last Conference of the Parties to CITES where the Parties decided to ban the commercial trade of these animals.

Lufthansa Cargo AG stops whale and dolphin transports

One of the main countries importing dolphins originating from the Black Sea has been Argentina. In the early 1990s, 14 animals were imported (at least 11 have already died) and Argentina enforced an import ban for these specimens. However this import ban, has been temporarily lifted and in 1999 four bottlenose dolphins and one beluga were imported to Argentina. WDCS in co-operation with the Wild Earth Foundation (WEF), an active Argentinean NGO, exposed the transport which took place in November 1999 during which two dolphins died being placed together in one transport container. The transport was carried out by Lufthansa CARGO AG from Frankfurt and it is documented that the transfer conditions were in violation to international air-transport regulations (IATA). Lufthansa CARGO AG bears the consequences and decided not to transport whales and dolphins for commercial purposes in the future. This is a big success for WDCS, WEF and for the protection of cetaceans.

Background to the trade in dolphins from The Black Sea

WDCS has documented that the mortality during transport and captivity of Tursiops from the Black Sea

is extremely high. Traders advertising specimens on the internet offer only a 15 day survival guarantee. In case one animal dies, another one replaces it. Therefore capture operations continue until today. Meanwhile live animals are already offered via the Internet for up to US\$ 20.00, in order to identify new markets. As the trade of these species has now been banned, WDCS will monitor the implementation and effectiveness of this ban. ■



As well as dolphins, the US Navy deployed trained sea lions during the last Gulf war.

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