

# WHALES & DOLPHINS IN CAPTIVITY





JEFFERY SIMPSON

Although an Arctic species, belugas are found in dolphinariums—even in traveling circuses—all over the world.

**Imagine** being forced to live your life in a small windowless room devoid of anything or anyone familiar to you. That's what faces a dolphin or whale captured from the wild for display in a zoo or aquarium—violently taken from his or her family or social group, and confined in a concrete tank or netted pen with no hope of ever being returned to the wild or leading a natural life.

Many people who love dolphins and whales (collectively known as cetaceans) have no idea how barren and unnatural their lives are in captivity. Dolphins in tanks may look as though they are smiling, but this is a quirk of their anatomy; the reality of their lives is tragic.

## **DYING TO AMUSE YOU**

Wild cetaceans live in complex societies with their own cultures and language and strong social bonds. Many species maintain close family ties with extended kin and travel long distances daily to forage and socialize. Cetaceans in captivity are denied these freedoms. It is impossible for a concrete tank or even a sea pen to replicate the natural, ever-changing, three-dimensional surroundings of their natural world.

Many captive dolphins (mostly bottlenose dolphins) around the world are held in tiny, dirty hotel swimming pools to attract visitors to vacation resorts; others lead even more artificial lives at noisy display facilities—"dolphinariums" or amusement parks—where they are trained to perform circus-like tricks to entertain the paying public.

In both settings, dolphins are also used in swim-with-dolphin programs (including those claiming to provide therapy), in which people pay high sums to interact physically with the dolphins in the water. Dolphins in petting pools are also forced to interact with humans, as paying visitors pet and feed the dolphins from the side of their enclosure.

Often the dolphins in these petting pools have no respite from the almost constant attention of visitors or from each other, and may even end up relying on the public for the majority of their diet—competing (and sometimes fighting) in a crowded pool for scraps of dead fish. These intense settings, which are largely unregulated, cause chronic stress for the dolphins; stress-related conditions like stomach ulcers are common. The dolphins involved are also at risk of intestinal damage, poisoning, and even death from ingesting dangerous objects such as coins and keys dropped or fed to them by visitors.

Petting pools and swim-with programs encourage the public to believe—wrongly—that touching and feeding dolphins in the wild is safe and legal. In fact these actions are illegal in the United States, and an increasing conservation concern as wild populations are disturbed by misguided boaters and tourists.

## **SURVIVORS OF A BRUTAL CAPTURE**

Although most captive cetaceans alive today in the United States were bred in captivity, wild capture operations continue in the waters of Japan, Cuba, and Russia (and possibly other locations as yet unidentified) to supply growing markets, including in China. When the target population is small, these removals pose a serious conservation threat.

Live captures also raise profound welfare concerns: Chased to exhaustion by high-speed boats, wild cetaceans can become injured or drown in the nets used to capture them. The selected animals (young females are preferred) are then placed in a sling and hauled onto a capture vessel or herded into a shallow sea cage, where they may endure extremes of temperature, overcrowding, and contamination.

Before they reach their final destination they must survive an intensely stressful journey by land, sea, or air, suspended in a sling inside a crate with only a small amount of water to keep them cool and relieve pressure on their organs. Despite the fact that a bottlenose dolphin's risk of dying increases six-fold in the first five days after transport, some are shipped over and over between facilities, to take advantage of various tourist seasons, to facilitate breeding programs, and for other husbandry reasons (such as to relieve overcrowding).

## DRIVE HUNTS

The most brutal cetacean capture method is the drive hunt, in which fishermen disorient whole pods of dolphins or small whales by banging on pipes suspended in the sea from boats, and corral them into shallow waters. There, beached or trapped close to shore with nets, the animals are slaughtered and sold for food.

In the Japanese town of Taiji, around 2,000 cetaceans may be killed in this manner every year. But the most lucrative targets of these drive hunts are actually the animals “spared” from the slaughter. Show-quality dolphins are sold—for as much as US\$150,000 each—to captive display facilities in Japan, China, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. The captivity industry effectively keeps the drive hunts going.



JENNY VARLEY

Wild dolphins can travel dozens of miles a day. In contrast, the minimum dimensions for a tank containing two bottlenose dolphins in the United States are just 24 feet in length and 6 feet in depth.



## ORCAS IN CAPTIVITY

Worldwide, about 55-60 of these multi-ton mammals are currently held in captivity. Although most of these were born in captivity, several were wild-born—the survivors of more than 150 orcas captured from the wild since 1964, from the US Pacific Northwest, the Netherlands, Iceland, Argentina, Japan, and Russia.

In the wild, the mean life expectancy for male orcas is 30; for females it is 50. Yet in captivity, most captive orcas die before they reach 25 years of age. Very few have passed 30 and even fewer (less than five) have passed 40. At best, captive orcas survive only as well as a well-studied but endangered population in the US Pacific Northwest; at worst, their annual mortality rate is several times higher than that seen in the wild.

At least one orca death and several serious injuries have resulted from altercations between orcas stressed to the breaking point by confinement with mismatched pool mates. Although US laws direct facilities not to house incompatible marine mammals together, orcas from widely divergent groups that do not interact in the wild are held in the same small pools and are even interbred.

In March 2016, SeaWorld, which holds fully half of the world's captive orca population, announced that it would end its breeding program, making this current generation the last of the species in SeaWorld tanks. This is a massive step forward to ending the display of orcas and a first step toward a future where cetaceans are no longer held in captivity anywhere.

## DO YOU REALLY WANT TO PUT YOUR CHILD IN THERE?

Dolphins, belugas, and orcas are large, powerful predators. Although not naturally aggressive to humans, cetaceans in captivity have inflicted serious injuries—including broken bones and internal injuries—on people who have been swimming with and petting them. Even trainers with extensive experience have been seriously injured and, in three cases, killed by orcas.

Dolphins produce three to five times as much urine and feces as human beings. When several dolphins are permanently confined in a concrete tank or sea pen, large amounts of sewage are produced every day. Spray exhaled from cetaceans' blowholes, as well as water contaminated with marine mammals' urine and feces, can transmit several infectious diseases to humans.

## EDUCATION AND CONSERVATION—REALLY?

Although some countries, including the United States, require captive display facilities to provide an education component in order to hold captive cetaceans, there is little evidence that the public's understanding of the natural behavior, conservation status, and demographics of wild cetaceans is advanced by the educational messages that accompany the “show.”

Likewise, despite robust public relations messaging that conservation is their primary goal, very few captive display facilities are involved in worthwhile conservation programs in the wild. In fact, relative to the revenue generated by their captive cetaceans, the facilities spend little on conservation.

In peak months, petting pool dolphins can be “on duty” 12 hours a day—an intense level of contact that can trigger aggressive reactions.





Accidents happen when incompatible animals are forced to share living space. According to official reports, Nakai of SeaWorld San Diego sustained this ghastly injury when he caught his lower jaw on a gate channel. Onlookers claim it resulted from an altercation with two other whales.

## YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The most effective way to fight the captive cetacean industry is with your wallet. Don't visit captive cetacean displays!

There is no need to confine and degrade cetaceans to enjoy their beauty. Countless responsible whale-watching companies allow people to observe cetaceans in their natural environments, while IMAX and other nature films provide a far more realistic (and cheaper) perspective than a visit to a tank. Wonderful museum exhibits such as the Sant Ocean Hall at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, are far more educational than the circus-like tricks in a show. You can also help cetaceans by

- Reading *Death at SeaWorld* and watching the documentaries *A Fall From Freedom*, *The Cove*, *Keiko: The Untold Story*, *Born to be Free*, and *Blackfish* to learn more about what goes on behind the scenes at captive display facilities.
- Avoiding swim-with programs, dolphinariums, and marine theme parks that house cetaceans.
- Distributing this brochure to your neighbors, family, and friends. Contact AWI for more copies.
- Writing to tour operators, cruise lines, or other companies that offer visits to captive display facilities to inform them of the problems.
- Writing to AWI if you learn of plans to build a new dolphinarium or plans to trade dolphins.



## Animal Welfare Institute

Human beings cherish home, family, and freedom—exactly the things taken from whales and dolphins when they are ripped from their families for a life in a concrete box. If we truly care for these creatures, we will work to protect them in their ocean homes.

Please join our efforts to reduce the suffering inflicted on animals by humans. Sign up for AWI eAlerts to receive the latest news on what you can do to help us protect all animals:

*[www.awionline.org/joinus](http://www.awionline.org/joinus).*



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