



Dolphins are far-ranging, fast-moving, deep-diving predators. In the wild, they may travel hundreds of kilometers a day, reach speeds of up to 50 kilometers an hour, and dive a hundred meters deep. They are also social creatures who form a complex society frequently based on kinship. Photo: N. Rose



Dolphin mortality shoots up six-fold during and immediately after capture - the ordeal is stressful and can cause physical injuries. Photo: COMARINO



The social environment of captive marine mammals is severely limited. No captive facility can adequately simulate the vast ocean or provide for their complex behavioral needs. Photo: WSPA

In the debate over marine mammals in captivity, the public display industry maintains that marine mammal exhibits serve a valuable conservation function, people learn important information from seeing live animals, and captive marine mammals live a good life. However, animal protection groups and a growing number of scientists counter that the lives of captive marine mammals are impoverished, people do not receive an accurate picture of a species from captive representatives, and the trade in live marine mammals negatively impacts populations and habitats. The more we learn of marine mammals, the more evidence there is that this latter view is correct.

The public display industry has for many years asserted that the display of marine mammals serves a necessary educational purpose and that the animals' welfare need not necessarily be compromised to achieve this. Mostly, this assertion has gone unchallenged. But as news gets out about traumatic captures, barren concrete tanks, high mortality rates, and aberrant – even dangerous – animal behavior, people are changing the way they “see” animals in captivity.

Most capture methods are extremely traumatizing, involving high-speed boat chases and capture operators wrestling animals into submission before hauling them onto a boat in a net or sling and then putting them into shallow temporary holding tanks. All capture methods are invasive, stressful, and potentially lethal.



Dolphins increasingly are being captured and held by inexperienced caretakers. Photo: WSPA

Tampering with the natural order

Some facilities promote themselves as conservation enterprises; however, few such facilities are involved in substantial conservation efforts. Rather than enhancing wild populations, facilities engaged in captive breeding tend merely to create a surplus of animals who may never be released into the wild and are therefore only used to propagate the industry.

Contrary to popular perception, captures of wild marine mammals are not a thing of the past. Live captures, particularly of dolphins, continue around the world in regions where very little is known about the status of populations. For smaller stocks, live capture operations are a significant conservation concern. Even for those stocks not currently under threat, the lack of scientific assessment or regard for welfare makes the proliferation of these operations an issue of global concern.

The public display industry maintains that it enhances the lives of marine mammals in captivity by protecting them from the rigors of the natural environment. The truth is that marine mammals have evolved physically and behaviorally to survive these rigors. For example, nearly every kind of marine mammal, from sea lion to dolphin, travels large distances daily in search of food. In captivity, natural feeding and foraging patterns are completely lost. Stress-related conditions such as ulcers, stereotypical behaviors such as pacing or self-mutilation, and abnormal aggression within groups



Viewing dolphins and whales in the wild is a favorite activity of nature-conscious travelers. Photo: N. Rose

frequently develop in predators denied the opportunity to forage. Other natural behaviors, such as those associated with dominance, mating, and maternal care, are altered in captivity, which can have a substantially negative impact on the animals.

Truth behind the advertising

Wild-caught marine mammals gradually experience the atrophy of many of their natural behaviors and are cut off from the conditions that allow the expression of cultural traits such as specialized vocalizations (“language”) and unique foraging techniques. Viewing captive animals gives the public a false picture of the animals' natural life. Worse yet, it desensitizes people to captivity's inherent cruelties – for virtually all captive marine mammals, the world is a tiny enclosure, and life is devoid of naturalness.

Even in the largest facilities, captive dolphins see their room to move decreased enormously, having access to less than one ten-thousandth of one percent of their normal habitat size.

Public display facilities often promote themselves as stranding and research centers. In fact, most stranded marine mammals die



Most tricks typically seen at marine mammal shows teach nothing about the animals' natural environment or behaviors. Photo: WSPA



The dolphin's perma-grin is often taken as a sign of contentment; in truth, it is just an anatomical characteristic that has no relation to health or emotional state. This dolphin appears to smile but is actually injured and gravely ill. Photo: WSPA



Standards for marine mammal care are woefully inadequate, if they exist at all. In Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia, where captive marine mammal programs are opening at an unchecked rate, animals are often kept in deplorable conditions. Two dolphins were kept in this filthy, fresh-water swimming pool for three months and were on the brink of death when discovered. Photo: WSPA

after they are rescued; few survive rehabilitation to be released to the wild; many releases are not monitored for success; and some animals, despite their suitability for release, are retained for public display. As for research, most studies using marine mammals in public display facilities are focused on improving captive care and maintenance practices – very few of them address crucial conservation questions.

With any marine mammal exhibit, the needs of the visiting public come before the needs of the animals. Enclosures are designed to make the animals readily visible, not necessarily comfortable. Interactive programs, such as swim-with-the-dolphins encounters and “petting pools,” do not always allow the animals to choose the levels of interaction and rest they prefer. This can elicit submissive behavior toward humans, which can affect the dominance structure within the dolphins' own social groups. Petting pool dolphins, who are fed continuously by the visiting public, can become obese and are at risk of ingesting foreign objects.

Bad for marine mammals and humans

The benign (but mythical) reputation of marine mammals, particularly dolphins, is fostered by the display industry, which is a form of miseducation. These species are, for the most part, carnivores, with complex social hierarchies, and are perfectly capable of injuring fellow group members, other marine mammals, and humans. The risk

of disease transmission, in both directions (marine mammal to human and human to marine mammal), is also very real. Marine mammal handlers have reported numerous health problems related to their work.

The ethical concerns raised by marine mammal captivity are especially marked for dolphins, as they may well merit the same moral stature as young human children. Although public display advocates will argue that claiming dolphins have “rights” is based solely on emotion and that these marine mammals are no different from other wildlife species in captivity, in fact the behavioral and psychological literature abounds with examples of the sophisticated cognition of dolphins. Their intelligence appears at least to match that of the great apes and perhaps of human toddlers – they are self-aware and capable of abstract thinking.

Fierce debate continues over the issue of mortality rates and longevity, especially of whales and dolphins, in captivity versus in the wild. The most conclusive data are for orcas; their annual mortality rates are significantly higher in captivity than in the wild. The mortality data related to live captures are more straightforward – capture is undeniably stressful and, in dolphins, results in a six-fold increase in mortality risk during and immediately after capture.

It would never be acceptable for zoos to allow visitors to interact freely in an enclosed space with chimpanzees, gorillas, or lions, yet these cautions are ignored when dealing with marine mammals. It is folly to regard interactions with marine mammals as safer than those with large animals of other wildlife species.

Conclusion

In this overview, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) have summarized the scientific and ethical arguments used to debunk the myths about marine mammals in captivity found in full detail in our *The Case Against Marine Mammals in Captivity* report. But while humans can subdivide the captive experience and even conclude that one aspect is more or less damaging to the animals than another, the totality of the captive experience for marine mammals is so contrary to their natural experience that it should be rejected outright. The HSUS and WSPA believe it is wrong to bring marine mammals into captivity for the purpose of public display.

The full report, *The Case Against Marine Mammals in Captivity*, will be available in August 2005. Please visit www.hsus.org or www.wspa-international.org for more.

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The Case Against Marine Mammals in Captivity

Report Overview
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**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**

WSPA

World Society for the Protection of Animals