

Farewell to Freedom ~ Truth hidden behind Dolphin's smile

History of Dolphin Captivity

Sporadic attempts to keep dolphins in captivity were made at least a century ago. Since the 1860s, several species of cetaceans have been kept in captivity in North America and Europe. And the first oceanarium with captive dolphins as a selling point opened in 1938.



Since then, the popularity of captive dolphins has been growing all over the world, with bottlenose dolphins as the main target species. Today, you can still see how admired the dolphin captivity industry is in many parts of the planet. In Hong Kong, several dolphin species have also been kept in captivity, including nearly 100 bottlenose dolphins (from Taiwan, Japan and Indonesia), 2 orcas (from Iceland), 15 Pacific white-sided dolphins (from Iki, Japan), 5 pilot whales (from Taiji), and 19 false killer whales (from Iki, Japan), but now only a small number of bottlenose dolphins remain.

Dolphin captivity issues have never stopped being controversial. Besides depriving the dolphins of freedom and welfare, dolphin captivity has also been accused of bringing negative impacts to the spectators and even undermining conservation efforts dedicated to the wild dolphins. Of course, dolphin captivity operators disagree. Now, let's see the arguments for and against dolphin captivity, and you may figure out the truth eventually.

General arguments FOR dolphin captivity

1. Captive dolphins are ambassadors for their species. Displaying the captive dolphins can raise public awareness on this kind of creature, and therefore enhance conservation of the wild populations. Therefore, benefits to the entire species outweigh the loss of freedom and welfare experienced by the captive ambassadors.

You may be surprised that, but the truth is, the above argument has no scientific grounds.

In the foreign countries, a poll called “Public attitudes towards aquariums, animal theme parks and zoos” has been conducted. It found that most of the respondents believed that the oceanaria did serve a vital role in education and conservation. A number of such parks held some educational and conservation programmes indeed, but the effects of the programmes are never systematically assessed. A couple of assessing criteria including number of attendants, type of activities held and amount of resources allocated are helpful in evaluating the programmes, but are unable to guarantee their quality.



Let's get in more deeply: what kind of messages do the captive dolphins convey to the public? The majority of Hong Kong people met their first dolphin in Ocean Park when they were still a kid. They may know nothing about dolphins, except the fact that they are charming and clever, jump very high and perform tricks. They may think bottlenose dolphin was the only dolphin species in the world, and some may not even know what species these dolphins they are looking at as dolphinarium deliberately avoid the fact that these are wild dolphins in the first place. Probably not until the late 1990's, many people in Hong Kong finally realize that there were other dolphin species residing in HK water.

This is how a dolphinarium is run: to entertain the spectators with dolphin tricks without even touching on the topic of dolphin knowledge and ecology. Have you ever heard a narrator of a dolphin show tell his/her audience the global distribution, natural behaviour and population status of bottlenose dolphins or orcas (killer whales)? How many viewers learn that the orca is

actually a dolphin, not a whale, after watching a dolphin performance? If a spectator learns nothing about dolphins after attending a programme, can the programme really be considered “educational”? Sometimes panels or “pre-show” introducing dolphin biology and distribution are available - but the number of people who really pay attention to these remains a big question mark.

What's worse, dolphin shows can provide false or even misleading information to the public. Dolphins in aquaria are usually trained by humans to perform all sorts of “intriguing” tricks like touching a hanging ball with their beak, waving to onlookers with flukes and jumping across obstacles. Sadly, not many people realize that this has already seriously distorted the natural behaviour of dolphins. These dolphin shows are so impressive that most watchers believe all dolphins, including wild ones, do routinely perform, or even love to perform tricks.

Feed-the-dolphin programme leads to more severe consequences. For a number of times we have come upon people who would like to feed the wild dolphins in the sea during dolphin watching tours. They are greatly convinced that wild dolphins are keen on seeking fish-feed from human hands. Obviously, they have no idea that wild dolphins never prefer dead and frozen fish. They eat those fish just because there is no living alternative.



Aquaria do provide an opportunity for people to know and care more for dolphins, but in that the dolphins are only creatures crafted by the aquaria, rather than genuine dolphins. Is this the “education” we humans desire?

In fact, with the blooming dolphin-watching activities held in nature, dolphinariums are no longer the only place where people can get a closer look at these fascinating marine mammals. Should you attend a high-quality dolphin-watching tour, it is for certain that you can see the natural side of the dolphin, and acquire accurate knowledge of them.

2. Various aspects of dolphins, including their physiology, intelligence and behaviours, can only be studied through research works carried out on captive dolphins.

It is undeniable that a great deal of research concerning dolphin anatomy, physiology and behaviour are based on captive dolphins, which enhance our knowledge of this kind of animal. However, the key issue here is not science, but ethics. Is all the research crucial enough to sacrifice the freedom of dolphins? For instance, now we realize that the IQ of

dolphins is fairly high. Do we humans need to go on further? And does the work contribute much to wild dolphin conservation, and even to human fortune? These are what researchers should consider.

In addition, captive dolphins cannot provide all the answers. For example, captive dolphins cannot exhibit a full range of behaviour as their wild counterparts do, like playing, hunting, migration, mating and nursing their young. We will never be able to get a full picture of the natural behaviour of dolphins from the captive subjects.

According to the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), over half of the research on captive dolphins around the globe is carried out by professional dolphin institutes. Most of these institutes will only retain

dolphins in their tanks for a short period, after which the animals will be set free. And the dolphins are never trained to perform tricks for entertainment. Their dignity is respected. On the other hand, commercial aquaria have accomplished a number of dolphin research projects, which, however, focus mainly on improving dolphin husbandry techniques. This has nothing to do with wild dolphin welfare. So you will see captive dolphins are not essential for scientific research.

3. With the exception of freedom, captive dolphins can get everything in their high-quality artificial living environment: their health status is always closely monitored by

veterinarians, they can have an endless supply of food, and they can be barred from all the risks they have to face in the sea.

This is the argument most often raised by dolphin captivity advocates. But think carefully. Are we sure the dolphins really appreciate what we offer them? Would they be willing to give up their freedom for a living environment of higher quality? Certainly we will never be able to obtain the real answer from the animals. What is more definite is that, wild dolphins have been living well and propagating in the ocean for ages, despite the lack of human care. Yes, they do have to face a series of problems in nature, including being attacked by predators, and migrating annually for food. But don't forget, they have already adapted to this kind of living, and hence bear the ability to deal with it. Inevitably some weaker individuals die of natural hazards, but this is the normal consequence of natural selection. It is unnecessary for us to interrupt how nature runs by "rescuing" the dolphins to a captive environment.

Moreover, we are not sure if the artificial living environment is really of high quality to the dolphins. In the concrete tank of aquaria, what a captive dolphin can see is a pool of blue. This is nothing comparable to the diverse oceanic environment they originally lived in. In



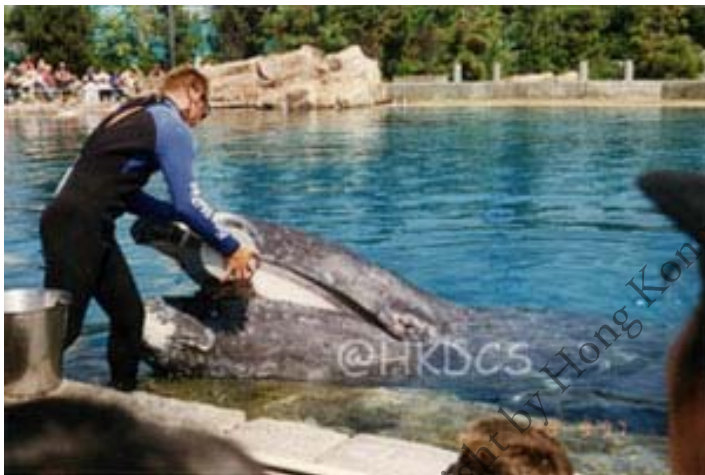
captivity, dolphins can never feed on live prey, play with their mates or travel the seas. Instead, they have to eat frozen dead fish, and be spared from their companions. Try to be considerate. Could you stand living in a beautiful and elaborate room, where home service is available, but never stepping out of it? If this not the way of life you prefer, why would you think the dolphins enjoy it?

Besides, there is no evidence that dolphins in captivity are healthier. Despite intensive

veterinary care, many captive dolphins are still subject to, and even die of, a larger number of diseases.

4. **Dolphinariums are usually engaged in rescuing and rehabilitating stranded or injured dolphins. Displaying captive dolphins helps subsidize the dolphin rescue project.**

Utilizing artificial environment though, rehabilitation of stranded dolphin is different to dolphin captivity. In fact, quite a number of voluntary dolphin hospitals can be found all over the world. They mainly aim at rescuing and rehabilitating stranded or injured dolphin, but never display or train them to make money. Moreover, these laboratories will return the recovered dolphins back to sea and monitor their post-release conditions for scientific purposes, while commercial aquaria seldom do so.



What's more, according to some statistics, dolphin itself is already well-admired enough to raise much publicity and hence donation to support the operation of dolphin hospital, suggesting that rehabilitation operation is not essentially supported by dolphin shows.

5. **Maintaining endangered dolphin species in captivity saves them from the brink of extinction. The technique of captive breeding developed from abundant species can even be applied on the captive stock of the threatened ones, with an aim to reintroduce the successfully bred individuals to the nature. This surely contributes much to conservation of wild population.**

In 2001, two bottlenose dolphins were successfully bred in HK, using the technique of artificial insemination. Scientists were greatly delighted by that news, saying that captive breeding of dolphins was feasible. They argue that the technique can be applied to the captive stock of the threatened species, with the aim of reintroducing the successfully bred individuals to the wild, which can contribute much to conservation of wild population.

It is not bad if techniques of artificial breeding can be applied to endangered dolphin species. Unfortunately, no such case has happened so far, in the whole world. In fact, despite the “success” of artificial insemination, Ocean Park still aims to import bottlenose dolphins from other places, including the controversial Solomon Islands, which tells how overrated the success of this artificial breeding programme has been.



The renowned baiji can even tell you more. The baiji is a freshwater dolphin exclusively occurring in the Yangtze River in China. It is a critically endangered species with the wild population no more than 100 individuals. Since the 1980s, researchers in mainland China have been capturing wild baiji in the hope of breeding them by artificial means. However, they have not once been successful in the past two decades. The

main problem is, the number of wild baiji is so low that it is difficult to spot them in the river, not to mention capturing them. Indeed, several baijis have been caught in previous years, but apart from one, all passed away soon after they were caught. (The remaining one died too in July 2002) So you can see, trying to apply a captive breeding technique to endangered dolphin species is just pie in the sky.

Furthermore, is artificial breeding a genuine solution to species extinction? The problem leading to their extinction results from all sorts of human activities, like water pollution, net

entanglement and loss of habitat. If all these environmental threats are not lessened, it is meaningless to breed any endangered dolphin in captivity. Even if the captive subject is reintroduced into the wild, do you think they can survive in the deteriorating environment? Actually the only efficacious way to save the threatened dolphin is to protect and improve their habitats, not to avoid the real problem by means of removing the animals from the nature.

General argument AGAINST Dolphin captivity

1. **Dolphin captivity is inhumane. No matter how well does the mankind care for them in artificial environment, they are already deprived of freedom and welfare**

Dolphin captivity is atrocious from the start. Have you ever thought of how the captive dolphins come to the dolphinarium? They are actually captured from the sea by force. According to a prominent organization against dolphin captivity "The Dolphin Project", dolphin capturing boats first chase dolphin pods to exhaustion or into a shallow bay, then the dolphins will be surrounded by a net. At this time the dolphins will be lassoed and dragged onto the boat. After selection, those inappropriate (the lucky ones) are thrown overboard, while the selected are brought ashore, without the chance of returning to their home and seeing their pods again.

How do captors select "appropriate" dolphin for dolphinariums? They prefer dolphins aged between two to four years old. However, dolphins of these ages are usually still associated with mothers. The fact is, mothers and calves are usually brutally separated at the time of capture. Dolphins are sociable and sentimental. Separation with pods and even mothers can be greatly damaging to them. According to some documents, many dolphins die of shock resulted from separation.

After capture, the dolphins are usually transported to somewhere distant. Long-time transportation poses additional stress to the animals. In recent years, ten belugas captured in Russian waters were transported to an aquarium in Taiwan. Normally beluga only occurs in polar waters, but Taiwan is situated at subtropical area, so belugas there are greatly stressful. Two of the belugas were dead soon after arriving at Taiwan. In total, six

of the ten belugas have been dead.

Even after arriving at the aquaria, the dolphins are not humanely treated. They lose their freedom forever, and are forced to do all sorts of tricks to amuse mankind, just like those animals performing in circuses without dignity. Tricks like jumping through hoops are not dolphins' natural behavior, then how can the trainers make them to do so? The answer is



food. Dolphins in captivity rely entirely on man to feed them. Trainers take advantage of this and use food as a positive reinforcement, making the animals do the tricks they require. Particularly during training session and before show, hunger is deliberately induced to make the dolphins more compliant. For the rest of their life, the dolphins have to revolve compulsively around the food given by the trainers. Do you agree this is a humane way to treat dolphins?

Under such conditions, a great number of dolphins are much stressed. According to the "Dolphin Project" and some people in the vocation, captive dolphins often feel anxious and even act abnormally, like breaching incessantly in the tank, not obeying trainers' instructions, or even biting trainers. You can imagine the fate of these "disobedient" dolphins. They will be punished in various ways, until they comply with the instructions again. The punishments include not feeding them, and frightening them by throwing object into their tank. Once I have even witnessed that a trainer of an oceanarium shut a "defiant" dolphin in a very tiny tank, and even yelled at it. I was just wondering what the dolphin had done wrong. Is not following instruction the dolphin's fault? It is mankind who caught the dolphin from the sea. Who makes fault first?

2. Removal of individuals from the wild population to supply captive facilities poses menace to the wild stock, even leads to their decline.

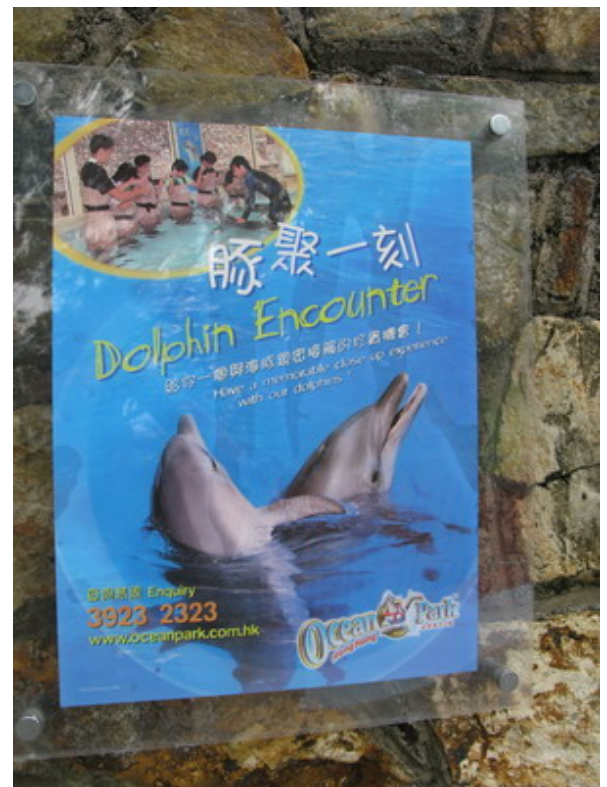
In fact, interminable capture of individuals does threaten the wild stock. At present, the dolphin population status in various places of the globe is still unknown, particularly in

Asian regions, but the capturing process still goes on, such as in Solomon Islands and Japan. No one knows if the hunting processes will extinguish the local population. To those populations known to be declining or even endangered, hunting process poses a great risk. One of the orca populations in Canada abruptly dwindled due to the unregulated capture conducted in 1960-70s. Baiji in China is another victim. They were once the target of researchers for captive breeding. But they are so few that even catching a few individuals affects the viability of the population. Even though in some regions the wild populations may be large enough to tolerate some “sustainable” catches, it should be noted that the revenue gained from capturing dolphins will simply encourage more people to catch more, subsequently threatening the local population. Therefore, capturing dolphins for captivity does nothing good to the species

“Swim with the dolphin” programme

“Swim with the dolphin” programs have become rather popular across the US and Europe, and more recently in Asia, and are mostly held by oceanaria. They will first hold a briefing for the participants explaining the dolphin conditions and things to note; then let the people down in the tank to touch and swim with the dolphins. Some may even allow the participants to get on the dolphin's back. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) of the US conducted research on the impact of such a program on dolphins and tourists in 1994, revealing the potential risks of such activity.

In the interactive program, the dolphins are forced to touch those who pay to interact with them. They might have to serve a few customers a day, so it is extremely stressful. NMFS requires that all such facilities in US must provide a refuge in the pool for them to take rest, where access of man is prohibited. However, it is found from the study that the haven is not very effective in fact, as the dolphins in the refuge are usually recalled by the trainers to continue their





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interaction with the customers.

Without adequate rest, dolphins involved in such programs may become aggressive, which may then even threaten the safety of the program participants. In foreign countries, injuries caused by dolphins are not uncommon, while in severe cases, injuries may include broken bones and shock. Dolphins do not intentionally hurt humans, but they may hurt people accidentally when they are annoyed. Another risk is disease infection. In fact, though intensive care is offered by the vets in the oceanaria, dolphins in captivity are subject to lots of infections. As dolphins are mammals, some diseases they contract are potentially transmissible to humans, including the bacterium *Salmonella*, and even the lethal melioidosis. That's why people have to think twice before taking part in this kind of activity.

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