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### **Statement: A call on the Ocean Park Hong Kong to announce plans for captive dolphins retirement and commission a feasibility study of seaside sanctuary**

Ocean Park Hong Kong (OPHK) has recently released their plan of a business and operation model revamp in January 2021. According to OPHK Chairman Lau Ming-wai, the management board is considering to donate the captive dolphins to other facilities<sup>1</sup>. Hong Kong Dolphin Conservation Society (HKDCS) believes that if OPHK acts responsibly as a conservation and educational organisation, it should respond to the demands from the public and international NGOs to improve the welfare of the captive animals. OPHK should follow the practices of other regions, such as United States<sup>2</sup>, Australia<sup>3</sup>, Indonesia<sup>4</sup>, and South Korea<sup>5</sup>, and prioritise the feasibility study of transferring the captive dolphins to a “seaside sanctuary” in which the captive dolphins can enjoy an improved well-being. OPHK should also prepare for any possible future crisis and the potential risks posed to all the captive animals. We urge Ocean Park:

1. To promise not to transfer any dolphins to any aquariums in the mainland China or other countries where these dolphins would continue to be on public display and forced to perform in shows or breed artificially. Such irresponsible actions would violate OPHK’s commitment to end the dolphin show and would collateralise the welfare of the captive dolphins;
2. To prioritise animal welfare and set up a clear timeline of retirement plan for the captive dolphins. OPHK should commission a feasibility study by independent experts for the establishment of a dolphin seaside sanctuary for the dolphins;
3. To stay transparent on the arrangement of captive cetaceans during the business model revamp;

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<sup>1</sup> Ming Pao, 19<sup>th</sup> January, 2021. <https://m.mingpao.com/pns/要聞/article/20210119/s00001/1610994199367/表演永久取消-海豚「不放生」去向待研>

<sup>2</sup> In 2016, the National Aquarium in Baltimore, Maryland, in the United States announced that it would be closing its dolphin exhibit and building a seaside sanctuary where it would retire its dolphins by 2020.

<https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/op-ed/bs-ed-aquarium-dolphins-20160613-story.html>

<sup>3</sup> In 2018, Dolphin Marine Magic in New South Wales, Australia, agreed to work in partnership with animal protection groups to conduct a feasibility study on establishing a seaside sanctuary for its 5 bottlenose dolphins.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-09/study-looks-at-creating-sanctuary-for-nsw-captive-dolphins/10093592>

<sup>4</sup> In 2019, an animal protection group found out the impaired health condition of some dolphins in a Indonesia hotel pool with poor water quality. Afterwards, the group transferred the 4 captive bottlenose dolphins to the newly built seaside sanctuary in Bali, the Umah Lumba Rehabilitation, Release and Retirement Center. It was 15 meters deep and the facility located in a natural bay was built for rehabilitation and retirement of captive dolphins around the world. The dolphins received care and were evaluated towards possible release by veterinarians. Two of the dolphins were found suitable for release into their home range would be sent to another seapen facility the Camp Lumba Lumba Rehabilitation and Release Center in Indonesia and be prepared for readaptation of survival skill to live independently before the release.

<https://www.dolphinproject.com/campaigns/indonesia-campaign/bali-sanctuary/>

<sup>5</sup> In 2013 and 2015, an aquarium in South Korea successfully released a total of 5 captive bottlenose dolphins in Jeju in accordance with a court decision. One of them gave birth in the wild in 2016.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/160426-dolphins-oceans-science-animals-captivity>



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4. To invest in long-term educational and entertainment projects with innovative technologies such as virtual reality and CGI exhibits and to phase out the outdated display using live animals;
5. To put an immediate end to the artificial and captive breeding and the interactive programs “Dolphin Encounter” and effectuate the commitment to end the dolphin performance.

HKDCS believes that the captive dolphins in OPHK are not suitable for release. However, staying in seaside sanctuary where dolphins will no longer be used for entertainment could greatly enhance the welfare of these dolphins along with proper veterinary care and enrichment in the long-term. In recent years, many aquariums have been actively seeking suitable sites for establishing cetacean seaside sanctuaries in their natural habitats<sup>6</sup>, or relocating captive cetaceans to the sanctuaries built by NGOs<sup>7</sup>.

International animal welfare and conservation organisations have been aware of the future arrangement of the captive dolphins in OPHK. In response to the bankrupt crisis of OPHK, The Asia for Animals Coalition<sup>8</sup> and the China Cetacean Alliance<sup>9</sup> wrote an open letter to the directors of OPHK on 18<sup>th</sup> June, 2020, to urge OPHK to consider alternative arrangements for the captive dolphins currently under their care<sup>10</sup>. In the letter, the co-signed international animal welfare and conservation organisations stated, “The benefits of moving the captive dolphins to sanctuary should not be underestimated”. By exploring this possibility, the welfare of the animals would be greatly improved in a more natural setting and OPHK would be setting an important precedent, with cetacean welfare and conservation at its heart, for other ocean theme parks. The undersigned international organisations also recommended that OPHK should take advantage of the reprieve it has received via the grant from the Hong Kong Government to prepare an action plan on how it can be better prepared for any possible future crisis.

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<sup>6</sup> In 2019, Shanghai Changfeng Ocean World transferred two beluga whales in captivity to the SEA LIFE TRUST Beluga Whale Sanctuary in Iceland. Living in a natural bay of up to 3 hectares in size (equivalent of the size of 17 tennis courts) and 10 meters deep, under the care of experts and veterinarians, the beluga whales had adapted to the sea environment again.

<sup>7</sup> The Aegean Marine Life Sanctuary, a dolphin sanctuary for dolphins is situated on the Greek island of Lipsi. It would operate by the end of 2021 and allow the captive bottlenose dolphins from aquarium to retire in the sanctuary. As a model for the dolphin seaside sanctuary, the Greek sanctuary could be expanded in the future to accommodate more dolphins in a long run.

<sup>8</sup> The members of the Asia for Animals Coalition include Anima-Society for the Protection of Animals (Macau), Animal Concerns Research & Education Society, Animal Guardians, Animal People Forum, Animals Asia Foundation, Big Cat Rescue, Blue Cross of India, Change for Animals Foundation, Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organisations, FOUR PAWS, Humane Society International, RSPCA UK, Sarawak Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (HK), The Philippines Animal Welfare Society, VShine Animal Protection Association, World Animal Protection.

<sup>9</sup> The members of the China Cetacean Alliance include the Animal Welfare Institute, Born Free Foundation, Endangered Species Fund, Environment & Animal Society Taiwan, Hong Kong Dolphin Conservation Society, Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation, Life Investigation Agency, Marine Connection and Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society.

<sup>10</sup> The China Cetacean Alliance, 18<sup>th</sup> June, 2020. China Cetacean Alliance asks Hong Kong Ocean Park to consider a better future for the cetaceans in their care. <https://chinacetaceanalliance.org/2020/06/18/china-cetacean-alliance-asks-hong-kong-ocean-park-to-consider-a-better-future-for-the-cetaceans-in-their-care/>



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On behalf of the undersigned international organisations in the open letter, and the many millions of members they represent, HKDCS respectfully reiterate and ask that OPHK consider our suggestions, to demonstrate the most compassionate and sustainable way forward for the park and the wider ocean theme park sector, by studying the feasibility of the establishment of a seaside sanctuary for the park's cetaceans; by ending cetacean breeding and by following through with its commitment to end animal performances.

19<sup>th</sup> February, 2021