



Position paper on the planned dolphin show in Karachi

Background

The planned dolphin show to be established this year with the cooperation of Pakistan Navy will be held for the citizens of Karachi in November 2013. The idea is to hold a series of dolphin shows for joy and fun. Detailed assessments have proven that the cetaceans (order of mammals include whales, dolphins and porpoises) population in the Sindh-Balochistan waters is a considerably healthy population and consists of 12 species of marine dolphins and whales. Surveys in near-shore and off-shore waters showed that the bottlenose dolphin, the humpback dolphin, the spinner dolphin, Risso's dolphin and the Killer whale (which is scientifically categorized as a dolphin) occur in moderate numbers in Pakistan's seas, as does the finless porpoise. A number of whales including Bryde's whale, Cuvier's beaked whale, the fin whale, the sperm whale and the endangered hump-backed whale, are also found in Pakistan's waters. These species are known to occur in Oman, on the other side of the Arabian Sea, and earlier studies had suggested that some of the population may spend part of the year in Pakistani waters. There is also a freshwater river dolphin, the Indus Blind Dolphin, an endemic species to Pakistan which can be found in KPK, Punjab and Sindh stretches of the River Indus.

Conservation threats

Amongst the most serious threats faced by cetaceans is the release of heavily-polluted water with traces of heavy metals by the ship-breaking industry into the sea. Other threats include the falling fish stocks which is taking away the components of the food chain supporting these beautiful animals, among others like the silting of rivers because of dwindling mangrove forests, the growth of toxic algae and the presence of rubbish and plastic bags in the sea which could prove fatal for whales and dolphins. Additionally, deadly collisions with large sea-faring vessels, some fishing practices, seismic surveys and military operations all documented and reported in the past pose a serious risk for these species' survival. Aside from many whaling nations, the bycatch casualties, the drive fishing, the deliberate and calculated harm done to small cetaceans; not to mention various oil company disasters, there are also hotels known for dolphin deaths, marine sanctuaries at risk, increasing dead zones (water bodies with no biological life), and marine aquariums with horrendous reputations - all over the world.

Conservation status

All cetacean species are endangered, throughout the world, the numbers of whales and dolphins has declined, not with-standing their popularity. Whales have been over-hunted around the globe, including illegally in Pakistani waters by Russian whalers during the 1960s. It is worth mentioning that the North Indian Ocean sanctuary that protected whales as part of the global agreement with the International Whaling Commission, needs to be regularly monitored and renewed. The International Whaling Commission (IWC) has only recently wound down their annual meeting, with strong agendas for small cetaceans (dolphins, whales, and porpoises) and committees proposing action to prevent the further demise and likely extinction of several precious creatures/species. A step in the right direction.

The bottom line to keeping cetaceans and the large sea mammals in captivity?

Rights for cetaceans internationally have been discussed in courts of law and history has shown that enslaving cetaceans is in no way beneficial to the creatures. Why then, would a live dolphin show be considered a 'forward step'? We shall look at some case studies and analysis of experts on the changes in behavior of the captive animals. The true bottom line for any dolphin captured or purchased for exhibition is misery! Most people who are involved with animal and habitat preservation, whether formally or casually, are aware of the obscene number of dolphins that live short and miserable lives, dying unnaturally while in captivity. It is not the best way to offer people a chance at joy and fun, and neither is this a new form of entertainment for there are better ways to provide diversity from routine life in Pakistan. The animals belong to the sea and not in a concrete pool of water.

Dolphin Facts

Dolphins can swim over 40 miles a day, they engage in mating, foraging and play behavior with their pod members and they use their echolocation to explore their diverse ocean environment. In contrast, captive dolphins are forced to swim in endless circles in artificial habitats, interact with unfamiliar dolphins and other species, eat dead fish, and perform behaviors that are unnatural and in some cases painful. Captive dolphins also face exposure to human infection and bacteria, chemicals such as chlorine, and suffer from stress-related illnesses.

Captive Dolphin Behavior

Captive dolphins spend up to 80% of their time at the surface of the water seeking scraps of food and attention. This is in direct contrast to wild dolphins who spend 80% of their time below the surface of the water playing, hunting and exploring. Beaching themselves as part of the show so that visitors can pet or kiss them: If left in this position for an extended period, a dolphin's immense weight on land would slowly crush its internal organs. Captive dolphins have been trained to ignore their natural instincts; wild dolphins never voluntarily beach themselves.

Vocalizing for food rewards and nodding their head as if to say "yes" or "no" and offering "handshakes" or waving at the audience with their pectoral fins is not them taling: Dolphins are trained through food deprivation. When they successfully perform a trick they are rewarded with scraps of fish. If a captive dolphin waves to you, it is because it is hungry, plain and simple.

Swimming in circles or constantly peering through the fences (stereotypical behavior) or floating listlessly on the surface of the water are behaviors indicate that the animal is bored and psychologically stressed. Wild dolphins rarely lie still and with the entire ocean at their disposal, they would have no need to swim in circles! All of the above are unnatural behaviors consistently exhibited by captive dolphins. Dolphins perform these behaviors because they have been trained to do so using "positive reinforcements" - the captivity industry's politically correct term for food deprivation. They wave to the audience and kiss the trainer because they are hungry, not because they desire human interaction and sadly, they often float motionless in their tanks between shows because they are bored or lonely.

Some say its okay to use captive-born dolphins. While countless dolphins are still ripped from the wild to populate SWTD facilities, some programs use captive-born animals instead. They hold up their use of captive-born dolphins like a trophy, proof of their mission to conserve dolphins. The truth of the matter is that captive breeding programs offer no contribution to the conservation of wild dolphin populations, acting instead to replenish the industry's dolphins when supplies run low. The fact is, whether born in captivity or pulled from the ocean, all dolphins share the same physiological and psychological needs."

Case from Egypt:

The Marine Connection were very concerned when, in 2004, they were alerted to three dolphins and two belugas being kept in severely detrimental conditions in a captive facility called Dolphinella in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt. In particular, the belugas, named Feel and Hook, were being kept within a painfully small tank at temperatures far above the Arctic temperatures they require. The dolphins show was undertaken through a contract made with Russians, as part of a sort of cultural exchange. The Russian team consisted of a trainer, a vet, an assistant and the dolphins. There were originally six dolphins, now only two remain. Different stories were told by managers about what happened to the four animals. One version was that the conditions for keeping the dolphins were poor and they died whilst another states that four were sent to Sharm El Sheikh. It was revealed by one of the managers that one of the male dolphin was "mad" and sometimes hit its nose and head in the bottom of the pool. (It seems the dolphin which acts this way is under great stress and not mad as described). On further inquiry, it was learned that the new shareholders are not satisfied at all with the Russians, that already, a notice has been issued to end the lease end of this month.

Setting a bad example

Unfortunately, the commercial success of SWTD programs (Swimming with the Dolphins) and the high profile of the larger facilities in the U.S. have spawned a legion of copycat operations in the Caribbean, Mexico, Latin America and around the world. These operations are the driving force behind a sharp rise in dolphin captures from the wild. Many of these new SWTD programs lack the necessary funds and staff to properly care for the dolphins. Perhaps the most damaging aspect of the SWTD industry is the misconception it perpetuates among the general public. SWTD programs present themselves as "educational" and "eco-friendly". They market themselves to people who love dolphins, care about conservation and are looking for a tangible way to express this interest. What SWTD participants don't realize is that by patronizing these programs, they are not only contributing to this expanding, profit-driven industry, but they are ensuring that dolphins will continue to be captured from the wild and suffer in captivity.

Love dolphins? Don't support this and certainly don't buy a ticket! Untold numbers of dolphins die during the notoriously violent wild captures. These captures are carried out in secret - far from the public's eye - so obtaining an accurate number of dolphins killed is nearly impossible. What we do know is that the whole process is so traumatic that mortality rates of dolphins captured from the wild shoot up six-fold in the first five days of confinement. To the captivity industry, these numbers are accepted as standard operating expenses, but if this information was printed on SWTD brochures, it is unlikely that any person who cares about dolphins would purchase a ticket.

WWF Pakistan's stance

We feel strongly that the planned dolphin show will neither be beneficial to the animals nor the general public. There are sufficient opportunities for the public to see wild dolphins of the shore of Pakistan and indeed Karachi. They can be observed without too much effort or expense and the experience is much more rewarding than sitting around a concrete pool watching trained animals perform for their food.

Given the studies and experience around the world we are confident that this enterprise will cause severe suffering to the animals and will ultimately bring a bad name to the Pakistan Navy and Pakistan if anything happens to the animals.

We strongly condemn this planned dolphin show.