

Dolphins Dying All Around Us: Whale and Dolphin Captivity in Canada

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While Canadians have been disgusted by what is happening to Mexican dolphins destined for life in captivity, that nightmare is as real in our own country as it is south of the border.

There are three Canadian facilities in which whales and dolphins (also known as "cetaceans") are captive and a fourth is now being considered. The Vancouver Aquarium keeps five beluga whales and one dolphin. Due largely to public outcry against captivity, the aquarium has said that it will no longer take cetaceans from the wild, or keep orca whales, having recently shipped its last surviving orca, Bjossa, to Sea World. However, it might still acquire cetaceans already captive at other facilities.

The West Edmonton Mall once held four dolphins, captured near Florida. Two died in the last two years, as well as all four babies born to the two females. Spokespeople have said the mall is phasing out its dolphin display and will not replace them after the remaining animals die.

Marineland of Canada in Niagara Falls now holds ten belugas and seven bottlenose dolphins imported from Russia and the Gulf of Mexico, as well as seven Icelandic orcas. Over the years, at least seven orcas have died at the amusement park and five others who were exported or re-exported have since died at other facilities. Nine dolphins are believed to have died at Marineland since 1990, including eight imported from Cuba in 1986. Two Russian belugas, imported barely two years ago, have already died.

Right now, the Granby Zoo near Montreal is studying the feasibility of constructing the same kind of swim-with-the-dolphins facility as the Mexican dolphins have experienced.

Of course, all of these facilities will tell you that they would never hurt the animals that they love like family, and that a few bad apples shouldn't tarnish the whole industry. But the industry itself is a bad apple. It is a strange kind of "love" that would separate individuals from their real families and force them to live their lives captive in concrete tanks or shallow sea pens rather than free in the vast ocean environment to which millions of years of evolution has suited them.

The capture process is bloody and violent, as the Mexican experience has illustrated. Uniquely suited to a life in the open sea and bonded to a social group of close kin, the stress of being removed from the wild is extreme. Some die during capture. As many as 40% of bottlenose dolphins captured from the wild die within the first five days in

captivity. Some die from shock, heart attacks, even drowning. Some refuse to eat and starve to death or succumb to infections they cannot fight in their weakened state.

Life in captivity for those who survive capture, or for those born into it, is necessarily wretched. In the wild, cetaceans virtually never experience any kind of natural restraint or restriction of movement. Living in open oceans or along endless coasts, swimming from the moment of their birth, they do not encounter any natural, insurmountable physical barriers. Unlike many terrestrial animals, they are never enclosed in a cave or a burrow, and they never stop moving, swimming even when they sleep.

Captivity is restrictive. Far-ranging, deep-diving, constantly moving creatures become sedentary in tanks which, no matter how big, are bathtubs compared to their natural home. Their extraordinary sonar capabilities, by which they use sound waves to locate objects hundreds of metres away in open sea, are bombarded in captivity where sounds constantly bounce off the walls that enclose them. Regardless of the free meals and veterinary care, life in captivity is short and stressful.

Ironically, it is our love of these animals that attracts us to them in the first place. Children respond to aquarium commercials and ask to visit them. But children do not wish to hurt animals; if they knew the truth, they would ask to do something else. There are so many unintrusive ways to study these creatures: books, television, IMAX and other films, the internet, virtual reality... And if you think your children are somehow entitled to see a live animal in a tank just because they may never have the opportunity to see one in the wild, consider how you will respond when they ask to see the Amazon River or the Great Pyramids.

There are no laws in place to prevent places like Granby Zoo from opening a new dolphinarium, even though wild animals are dangerous and U.S. authorities have documented at least twelve cases of injuries by dolphins to people in "swim-with" facilities in the last few years.

The federal government refuses to end Canadian involvement in this trade, which it could do by prohibiting their capture from Canadian waters and prohibiting their import/export to and from Canada. Concerned Canadians should let Granby Zoo know how they feel about its plan and, while they're at it, let the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans know too.