



Executive summary

The case against marine mammals in captivity

5th edition





Above: sea lion swimming in the wild. Credit: iStock. by Getty Images
Cover: A pod of spinner dolphins off the west coast of Oahu, Hawaii.
Credit: World Animal Protection / Rachel Ceretto

“SeaWorld was created as strictly entertainment. We didn’t try to wear this false façade of educational significance.”

– George Millay, co-founder of SeaWorld, 1989

The case against marine mammals in captivity

For the 5th edition of 'The Case against Marine Mammals in Captivity', World Animal Protection and the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI) provide robust scientific evidence and ethical arguments to support the case that it is unacceptable to house marine mammals in captivity for the purpose of public display. Public display facilities housing marine mammals are not essential conservation or education resources, and the animals they display suffer poor welfare as a result of their captive environment. Furthermore, the capture and trade in live marine mammals poses significant global welfare as well as conservation concern.

Marine mammals, particularly small cetaceans such as dolphins and pinnipeds such as sea lions, are kept in captivity for human entertainment throughout the world. They are captured from the wild and transported to dolphinariums or are bred from pre-existing captive individuals. Over the last decade, there has been increasing public interest and awareness of the inherent suffering associated with the industry, resulting from high profile documentaries such as 'The Cove' and 'Blackfish' that cast attention towards controversial captures, unnecessary deaths, and the inhumane conditions synonymous with captive life for marine mammals. Despite this, driven by continued demand from the public and the travel and hospitality industry, marine mammals continue to be captured from the wild or bred and housed in captivity, for display in entertainment exhibits worldwide.

Every stage of the captive process, from capture, through transport, to a lifelong existence in small barren tanks, poses severe stress for marine mammals. Live captures of whales and dolphins from the wild are not a thing of the past and continue in several "hotspot" locations around the world. The best example of how invasive and stressful live capture can be is to look at small cetaceans: mortality rates of bottlenose dolphins captured from the wild shoot up six times higher in the first five days of confinement and take weeks to return to baseline. Furthermore, research on bottlenose dolphins and modelling of orca societies show that certain individuals play a crucial role in holding communities together, and that removal of these individuals - through natural or human-caused means - can have a substantial negative impact on the group members left behind. Separating calves from their mothers at an early age when they are too young to have learned essential survival skills dooms them to a life in captivity and can also lead to high levels of infant mortality and social abnormalities in later life.

Right: The animals are kept in small, chlorinated pools and made to perform daily tricks. Credit: World Animal Protection

But even if born in captivity, the main concern for many marine mammals is the artificial and barren nature of the captive environment, particularly the amount of space provided. In the wild, cetaceans can travel from 60 to 225km a day, at speeds from 30 to 50km per hour, and they can dive hundreds of meters deep. No facility can simulate the vast reaches of the ocean that these animals traverse. Even in the largest facilities cetaceans are only allowed access to less than 0.0001 percent (one millionth) of their normal habitat. The inadequate space provided in captivity suppresses natural behaviours such as consistent cardiovascular exercise, foraging for prey and social interaction with large groups of closely bonded pod mates. Additionally, marine mammal exhibits prioritise the needs of the visiting public and economic factors over the needs of the animals. Enclosures are designed to make the animals readily visible, not necessarily comfortable, and efficiency of maintenance dictates slick surfaces as opposed to naturalistic textures and substrates.

Some facilities display marine mammals in sea pens rather than traditional aquariums. While sea pens simulate more natural conditions, they are subject to alternative problems such as noise pollution from boat traffic and coastal development, and physical pollution from land-based features such as runoff from roads and sewage outfall. The habitat of marine mammals is difficult and frequently impossible to re-create or simulate in microcosm.



The inadequate conditions provided for captive marine mammals gives rise to a plethora of adverse impacts on the physical and mental welfare of the animals. Stress-related conditions such as ulcers, stereotypical behaviours including pacing and self-mutilation, and abnormal aggression frequently develop in predators denied the opportunity to forage. Diseases afflict captive marine mammals more frequently or more intensely than their free-ranging counterparts; captive cetaceans have been known to suffer from infections not known to afflict wild dolphins. The public display industry is not transparent with veterinary records and publishes very few welfare-related studies in the scientific literature, despite having direct access to the relevant data.

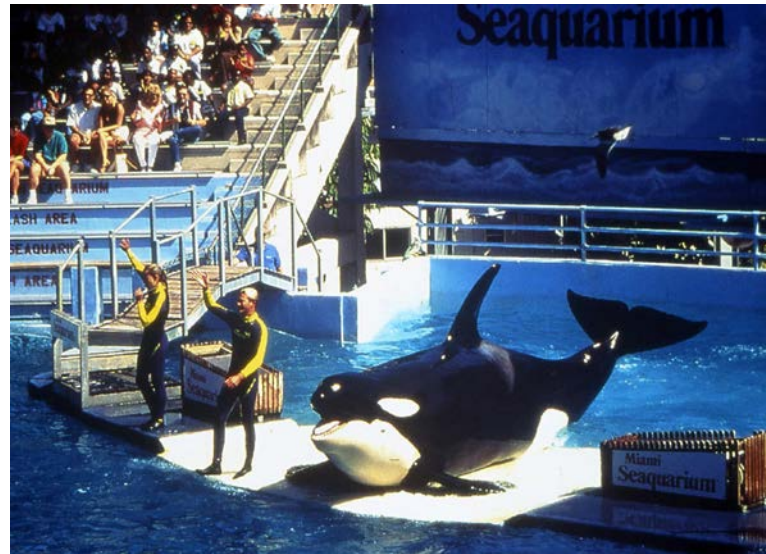
Many facilities offer direct interaction with marine mammals through feeding sessions or attractions such as swimming with dolphins. These interactions endanger both the animals and the human participants by increasing the chances of disease transmission and physical injuries, as well as stress for the animals. There are alarming numbers of injury reports, ranging from lacerations to broken bones.

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“There is about as much educational benefit to be gained in studying dolphins in captivity as there would be studying mankind by only observing prisoners held in solitary confinement.”

— Jacques Cousteau, environmentalist, filmmaker, and one of the most famous critics of using the behaviour of cetaceans in captivity as a model for animals in the wild

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Below: Killer whale performing with trainers at the Miami Seaquarium, Florida, USA. Credit: World Animal Protection

The public display industry often justifies marine mammal exhibits by claiming that they serve a valuable education function and that people learn important information from seeing live animals. However, a study found that less than half of reviewed dolphinariums provided any information on conservation or provided educational materials for children or teachers. Furthermore, it can be argued that viewing captive animals gives the public a false picture of the animals' natural lives. For example, many actions performed by dolphins in shows that are portrayed as "play" or "fun" are actually displays that in free-ranging animals would usually be considered aggressive or a sign of disturbance. Whilst education is one of the most important methods of ensuring the humane treatment and conservation of the myriad other species with which we share the planet, World Animal Protection maintains that exposure to captive marine mammals does exactly the opposite of what the industry rhetoric claims: instead of sensitizing visitors to marine mammals and their habitat, it desensitizes humans to the suffering inherent in removing these animals from their natural habitats and holding them captive in tiny enclosures with a life devoid of naturalness.

Similarly, it is often misleadingly claimed that marine mammal exhibits serve a valuable conservation function. In reality, fewer than 5 to 10 percent of zoos, dolphinariums, and aquaria are involved in substantial conservation programs and the majority of marine mammals currently being bred in captivity are neither threatened nor endangered. In fact, most captive-breeding programs simply ensure a supply of animals for display or trade, creating in many cases a growing number of surplus animals consisting of individuals with questionable genetic backgrounds. It would appear that for dolphinariums and aquaria to state that they are actively involved in conservation is little more than a marketing tool or a way to justify imports of animals – particularly because the overwhelming majority of marine mammal species currently being bred in captivity is neither threatened nor endangered, including bottlenose dolphins that make up the majority of marine mammals in captivity.

In recent years, films such as 'Blackfish' or 'The Cove', as well as several books, have exposed the grave welfare, conservation and health and safety concerns inherent to the captive cetacean industry and gained unprecedented worldwide public attention. The global outcry has led to some corporations severing their ties with key leaders in the cetacean entertainment industry, such as SeaWorld, which also suffered financial losses through lower visitor numbers, and which ultimately announced an end to their orca breeding program in 2016 and has subsequently de-emphasized orca shows in its advertising. The controversy also led to new legislation that bans the breeding of orcas for entertainment purposes in California, with federal bills proposed in the US and Canada.

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Across the world several seaside sanctuaries for orcas, belugas and dolphins are in development that aim to provide a much-improved environment for captive cetaceans – acknowledging that any enclosure will always remain a far cry from a full life in their natural habitat. In addition, we are a long way from being able to suggest that seaside sanctuaries are a scalable solution for the thousands of cetaceans currently in captivity. The majority of these animals have been held captive for most or all of their lives and therefore, while it may be possible for some individuals consigned to sanctuaries to eventually return to the wild, many of the residents would not be released and would require life-time care. The involvement of some former public display facilities in such sanctuary development, and importantly the increasing public rejection of the unacceptable practices of keeping marine mammals in captivity in the first place gives a glimmer of hope to see cetaceans and other marine mammals being respected and protected in the wild - where they belong.

World Animal Protection, AWI, and other animal protection groups maintain that a plethora of information is available clearly indicating that marine mammals do not cope well with captivity and it is impossible for marine mammals to thrive, not just survive, in such conditions. Taking animals from the wild or breeding animals in captivity for the purpose of human entertainment, despite the inherent suffering it causes for the individuals, raises serious ethical concerns. Marine mammals are denied freedom and autonomy and their captive environments provide a stressful life which has nothing in common with the life for which they evolved and adapted. Furthermore, the public display industry cannot be justified on the grounds of conservation or education value. The report concludes that it should be unacceptable for these animals to be held in captivity for the purpose of public display throughout the world. For marine mammals - such as cetaceans whose 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) a life in captivity is simply no life at all.

Below: Dolphins are kept captive in small pens or pools where tourists can interact with them. Credit: World Animal Protection / Andi Sucirta



We are World Animal Protection.

We end the needless suffering of animals.

We influence decision makers to put animals on the global agenda.

We help the world see how important animals are to all of us.

We inspire people to change animals' lives for the better.

We move the world to protect animals.

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