



ETHICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE KEEPING OF DOLPHINS

Koen Margodt, Ph.D | 6 March 2024

- I. INTRODUCTION
- II. WELFARE DOLPHINS
- III. ROLE DOLPHINARIUMS
- IV. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL CONTEXT
- V. SEASIDE SANCTUARIES
- VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. INTRODUCTION

II. WELFARE DOLPHINS

III. ROLE DOLPHINARIUMS

IV. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL CONTEXT

V. SEASIDE SANCTUARIES

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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- **Guest Professor Ethics** at Ghent University and other Universities
- Co-Chair of the **Global Ethics Committee of the Jane Goodall Institute (JGI)**
- Co-Chair of the **Cetacean Committee of the Jane Goodall Institute (JGI)**
- Author *The Welfare Ark* (2000), which led to Antwerp Zoo closing its dolphinarium

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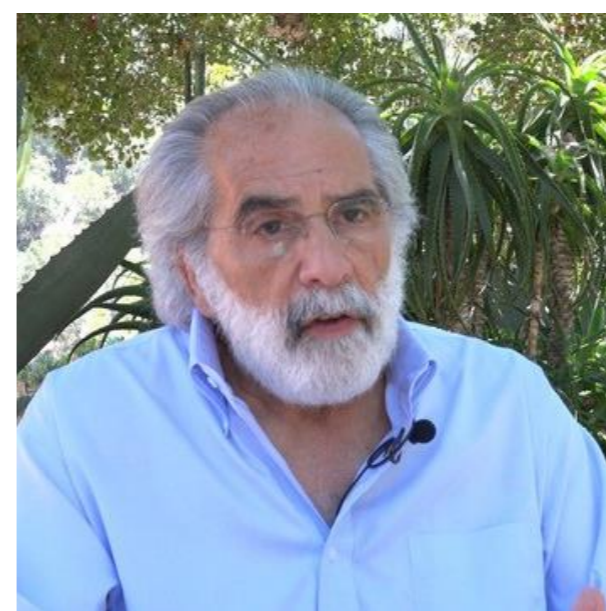
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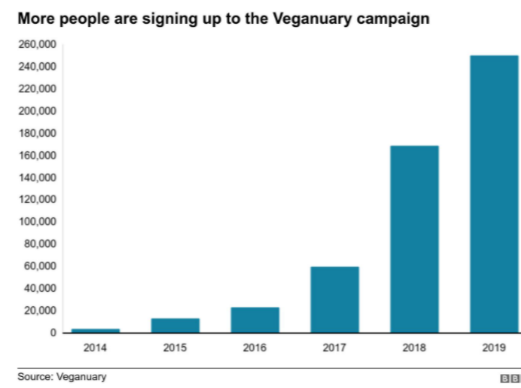
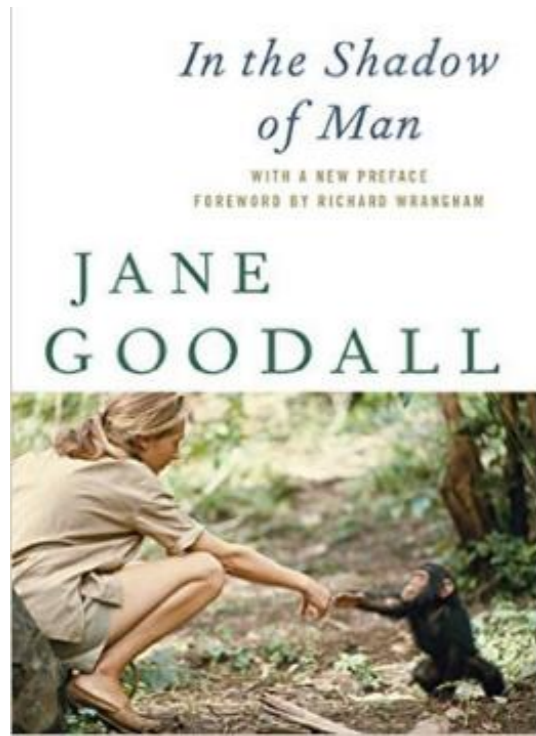
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UAE Dolphin Project
United Arab Emirates



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A CHANGING LANDSCAPE



Animals as
sentient
beings

Growing
Sensitivity
Animal
Welfare

Polarised
Debate
Dolphinariums

EU / Flanders
Leading Role
Animal
Welfare
Legislation

I. INTRODUCTION

II. WELFARE DOLPHINS

III. ROLE DOLPHINARIUMS

IV. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL CONTEXT

V. SEASIDE SANCTUARIES

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMPLEXITY OF KEEPING DOLPHINS

Extremely
smart

Live in large
pods

Fission-
fusion
society

Emotionally
complex

Large,
varied
habitat

Dives deep

Breeding
problematic

Stereotypies
captivity

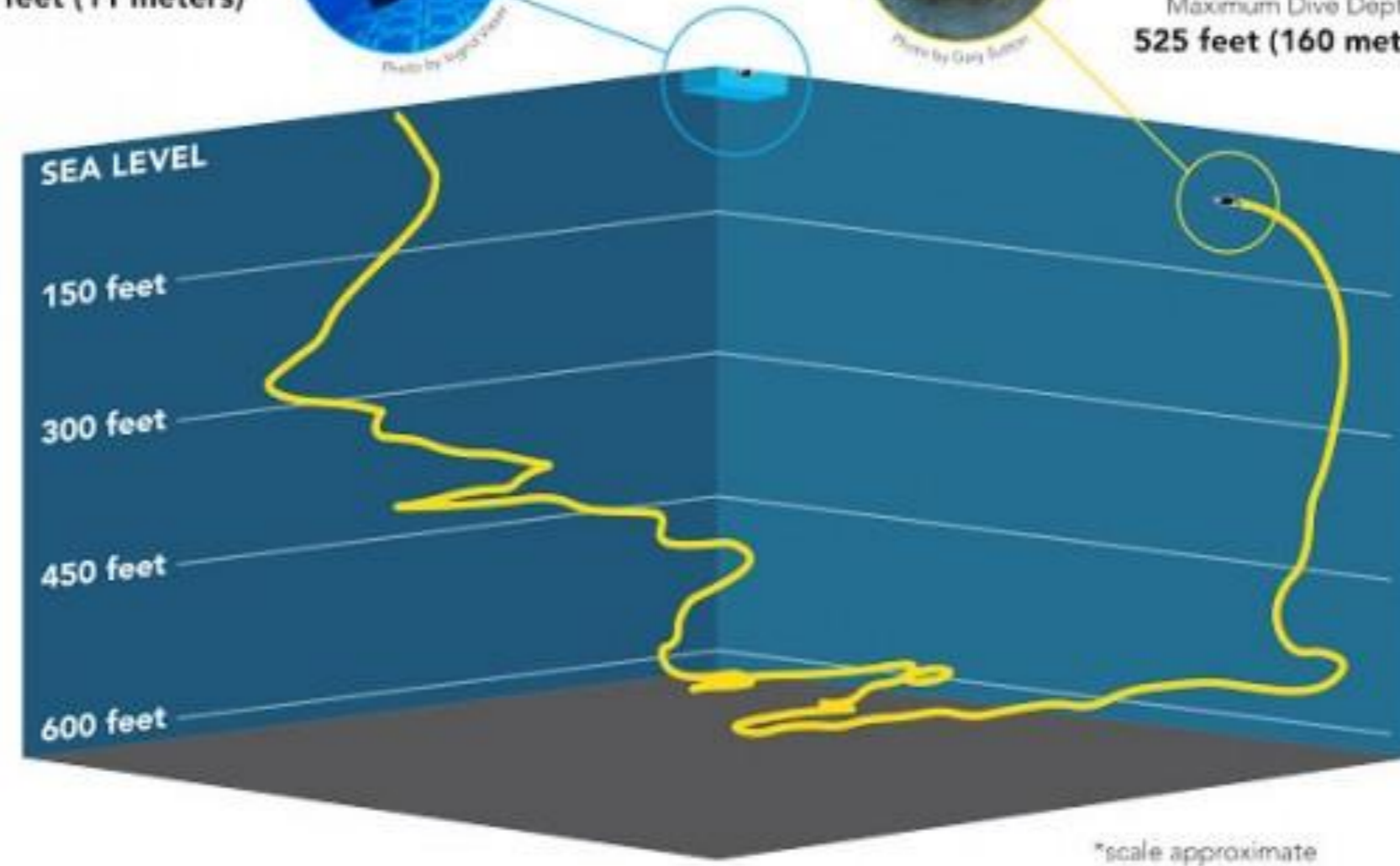
Stress,
boredom
and
frustration in
captivity

Medication
in captivity
(anxiety,
stress,
antibiotics)

Captive Killer Whale
Tilikum - 22 feet (6.0 Meters)
SeaWorld Orlando
Maximum Dive Depth:
35 feet (11 meters)



Southern Resident Killer Whale
K-33
Dive data recorded by
Cascadia Research Collective
<http://bit.ly/orcadive>
Maximum Dive Depth:
525 feet (160 meters)



(Max ever recorded is 853 ft)



Complex fission-fusion society with cultural transmission and complex communication



Even coastal bottlenose dolphins dive to hundreds of metres deep

BOUDEWIJN SEAPARK DOLPHINS

Puck
(captured
1966-...)

Linda
(captured
1980-...)

Roxanne
(captured,
1988-...)

Yotta
(Boudewijn
Seapark,
1998--...)

Indy
(Boudewijn
Seapark
2003-...)

Kite
(Harderwijk,
2005)

Moana
(Boudewijn
Seapark,
2015-...)

Seven still alive. But, what about breeding success?

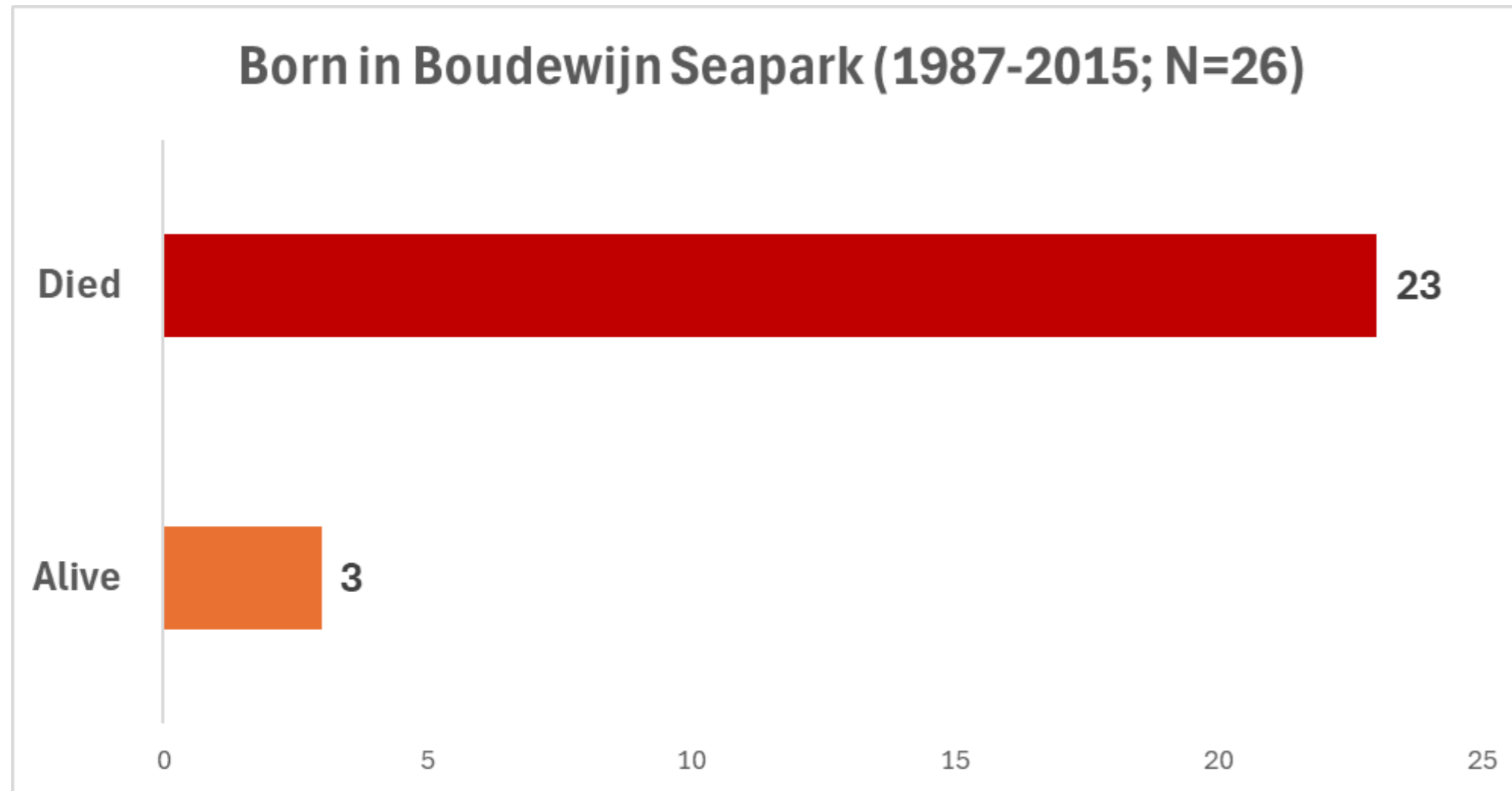
A DISASTROUS BREEDING EXPERIMENT

Oshin (1987-1988)	Kim's calf (1989†)	Terry's calf (1989†)	Fernanda (1990-1992)	Skippy (1990-2000)	Thea (1991†)
Stefanie (1993†)	Astrid (1994†)	Yasmine (1994†)	Simo (1995†)	Guarna (1995†)	Linda's Calf (1996†)
Nemo (1996†)	Linda's calf (1997†)	Yotta (1998-...)	Flo (1998-2012)	Milo (1999-2008)	Iggy (2002†)
Indy (2003-...)	Yotta's calf (2010†)	Roxanne Twin 1 (2011†)	Roxanne Twin 2 (2011†)	Bruce (2012†)	Origi (2014†)
	Moana (2015-...)	Ori (2015-2023)			

† = died same year when born; red = died; yellow = still alive

Source: <https://www.cetabase.org/inventory/boudewijn-seapark/>

A DISASTROUS BREEDING EXPERIMENT



- 88% (23/26) died
- 87% (20/23) died between 0-2 years
- Ori died last at 8 y in 2023
- No more births since 2015
- Not in study for Minister Weyts
- Death Ori only in media because of animal advocacy group
- Importance breeding for welfare not demonstrated
- In the wild 30% may die in first four years, but 70% survive in adulthood (Wells, 2021)

I. INTRODUCTION

II. WELFARE DOLPHINS

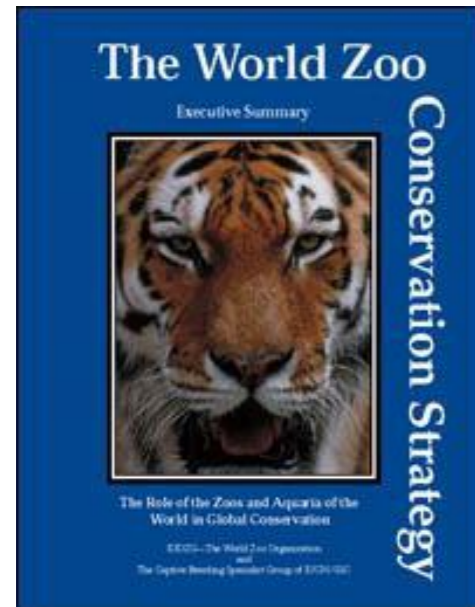
III. ROLE DOLPHINARIUMS

IV. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL CONTEXT

V. SEASIDE SANCTUARIES

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

STRATEGY ZOOS



EDUCATION

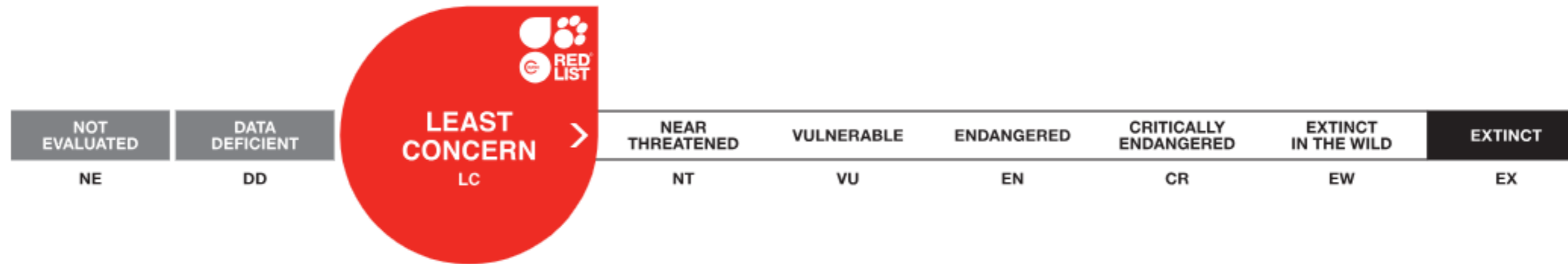
RESEARCH

FUNDRAISING

ENTERTAIN

CONSERVATION: BREEDING AND REINTRODUCTION OF
ENDANGERED SPECIES

CONSERVATION OF BOTTLENOSE DOLPHINS?



“The Common Bottlenose Dolphin is **among the most common cetacean species globally**. (...) The sum of available abundance estimates is around **750,000**, however the vast majority of the species’ range has not been surveyed therefore actual abundance is **considerably higher**.”

EDUCATION IN DOLPHINARIUMS?



- Usually part of an **entertainment park**
- **Circuslike shows** for dead fish
- Dolphins are already **extremely popular** – like dinosaurs, popularity not due to captive display
- **No open information** – history capture, failed breeding
- **Distorted view nature** for self-justification

DIRECT CONTACT IN DOLPHINARIUMS?



Dolphins can cause deep lacerations, in people and other dolphins—their teeth can be razor sharp and, even when damaged or worn down, can injure.

- Risk of **serious injuries** for humans
- Risk **disease transmission in both directions** - from humans to dolphins and from dolphins to humans
- **Stressful for dolphins**, personal space invaded by unfamiliar people, visitors do not understand dolphin signals

I. INTRODUCTION

II. WELFARE DOLPHINS

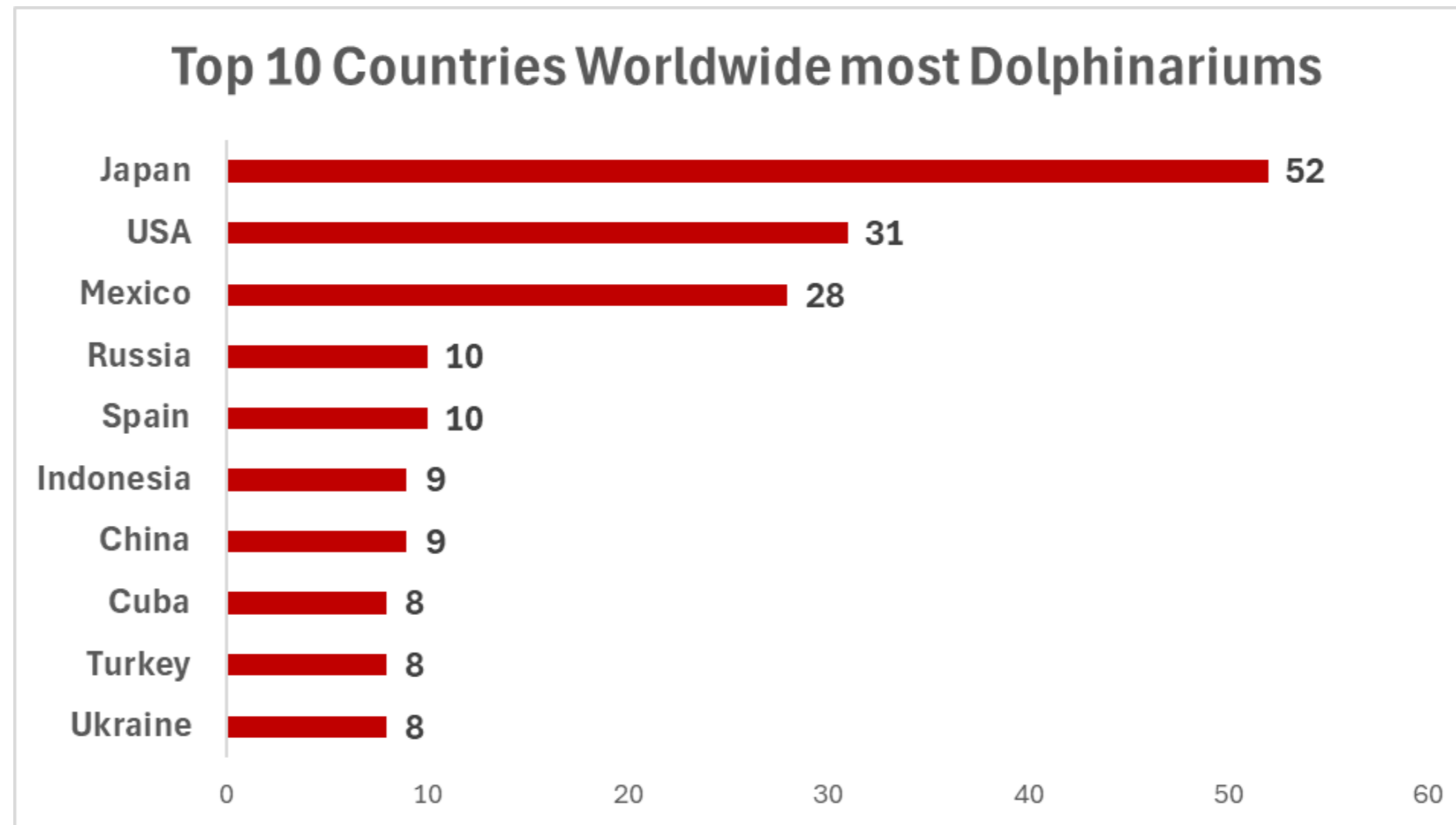
III. ROLE DOLPHINARIUMS

IV. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL CONTEXT

V. SEASIDE SANCTUARIES

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT



Countries with many dolphinariums are typically those with **less strict animal welfare laws** and where questionable practices occur, such as bull fighting (Spain), wildlife trade (China, Indonesia) and whaling (Japan). Dolphinariums are on the rise in countries such as China.

BOUDEWIJN SEAPARK

1. Boudewijn Seapark is owned by the **Spanish Aspro Parks**, which owns **68 amusement parks**
2. Aspro Parks owns **six dolphinariums** – in Belgium, the Netherlands (Harderwijk) and Spain (4)
3. Boudewijn Seapark is an amusement park with **more than 30 attractions** (such as the Orca ride roller coaster, Bobo's AquaSplash and Indoor Ice Rink)
4. In 2014 **one million Euro** was invested in Bobo's AquaSplash

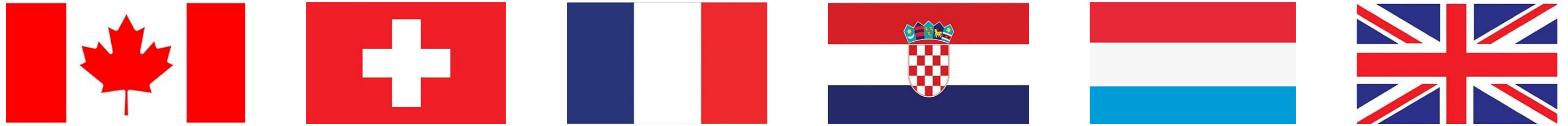
PUBLIC OPINION

“In 2015, an international online survey was conducted to investigate public attitudes on keeping cetaceans in captivity (N = 858).

Respondents were significantly ($p < 0.001$) more likely to be opposed to displaying dolphins and whales in marine theme parks and aquariums (**opposed to captive display: 54.4%**; support captive display: 45.5%).”

Naylor & Parsons, 2019 in *Tourism in Marine Environments*

INTERNATIONAL LEGAL CONTEXT



The keeping of dolphins has been **legally prohibited or so strictly regulated that (breeding in) dolphinaria stopped in at least fifteen countries**, including Canada, Croatia, France, Luxembourg, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Around **87 dolphinaria have closed** their doors over the last years.

I. INTRODUCTION

II. WELFARE DOLPHINS

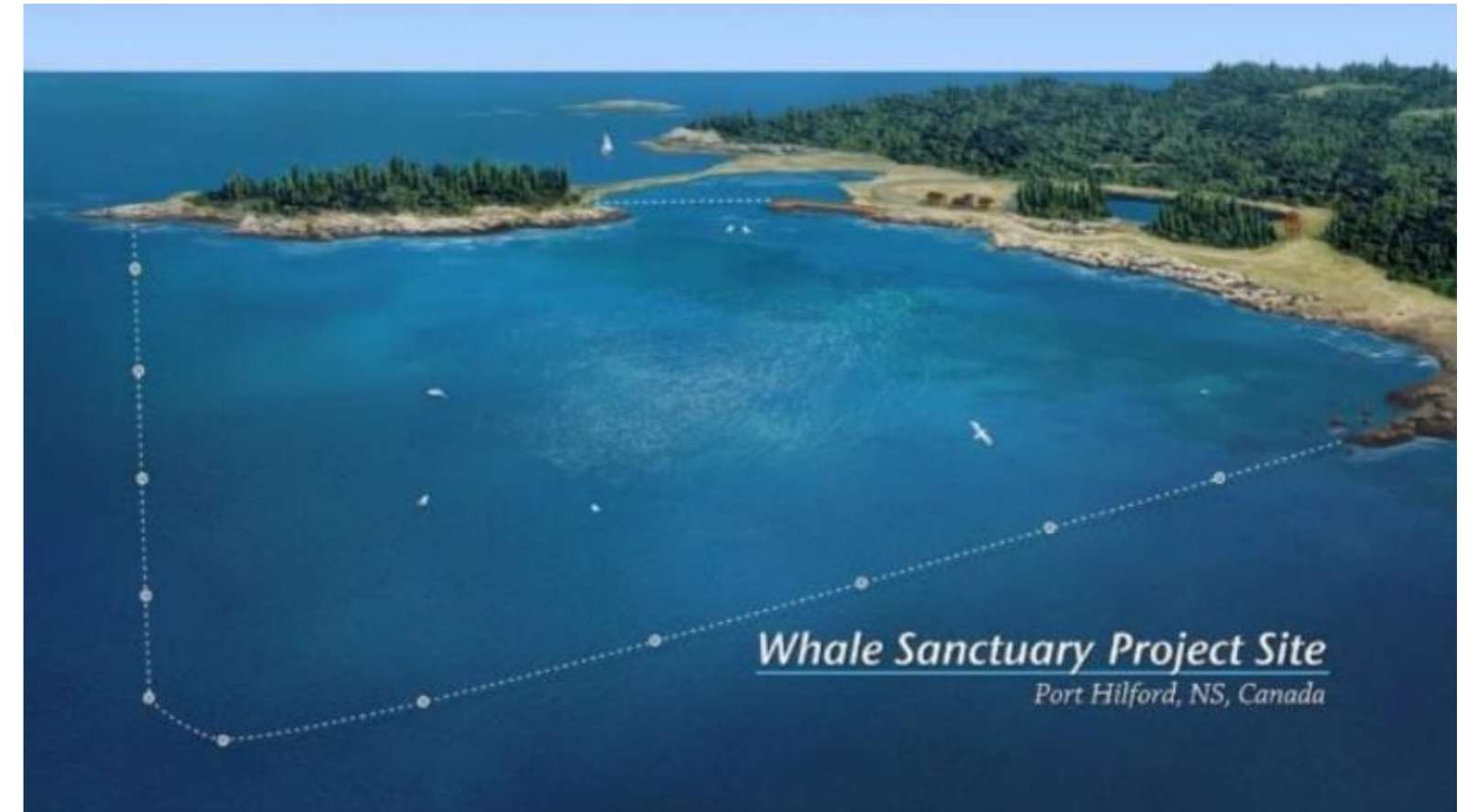
III. ROLE DOLPHINARIUMS

IV. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL CONTEXT

V. SEASIDE SANCTUARIES

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

WHALE SANCTUARY NOVA SCOTIA (40 HA)



Sea-side sanctuaries are more natural, spacious and varied. Therefore, these allow cetaceans a richer life with more autonomy for own choices.

NATIONAL AQUARIUM'S DOLPHIN SANCTUARY



“Our decision to build a sanctuary is rooted in what we believe to be best for the dolphins in our care. We have studied the issue and explored multiple solutions, ranging from rebuilding our existing tanks in a more naturalistic style to moving the dolphins to other accredited facilities. **After careful consideration, we've concluded that the best way forward is to create a protected, year-round seaside refuge.**”



“Phasing out dolphinariums to seaside sanctuaries will finally give dolphins a dignified life to live out, without entertaining people, or swimming around in small tanks. When given the choice, most animals choose freedom and the ability to make daily choices themselves.”

Prof. Dr. Denise L. Herzing

Florida Atlantic University

40 years of long-term study of wild dolphins

Founder and Research Director of the Wild Dolphin Project

Member of the Cetacean Committee of the Jane Goodall Institute

I. INTRODUCTION

II. WELFARE DOLPHINS

III. ROLE DOLPHINARIUMS

IV. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL CONTEXT

V. SEASIDE SANCTUARIES

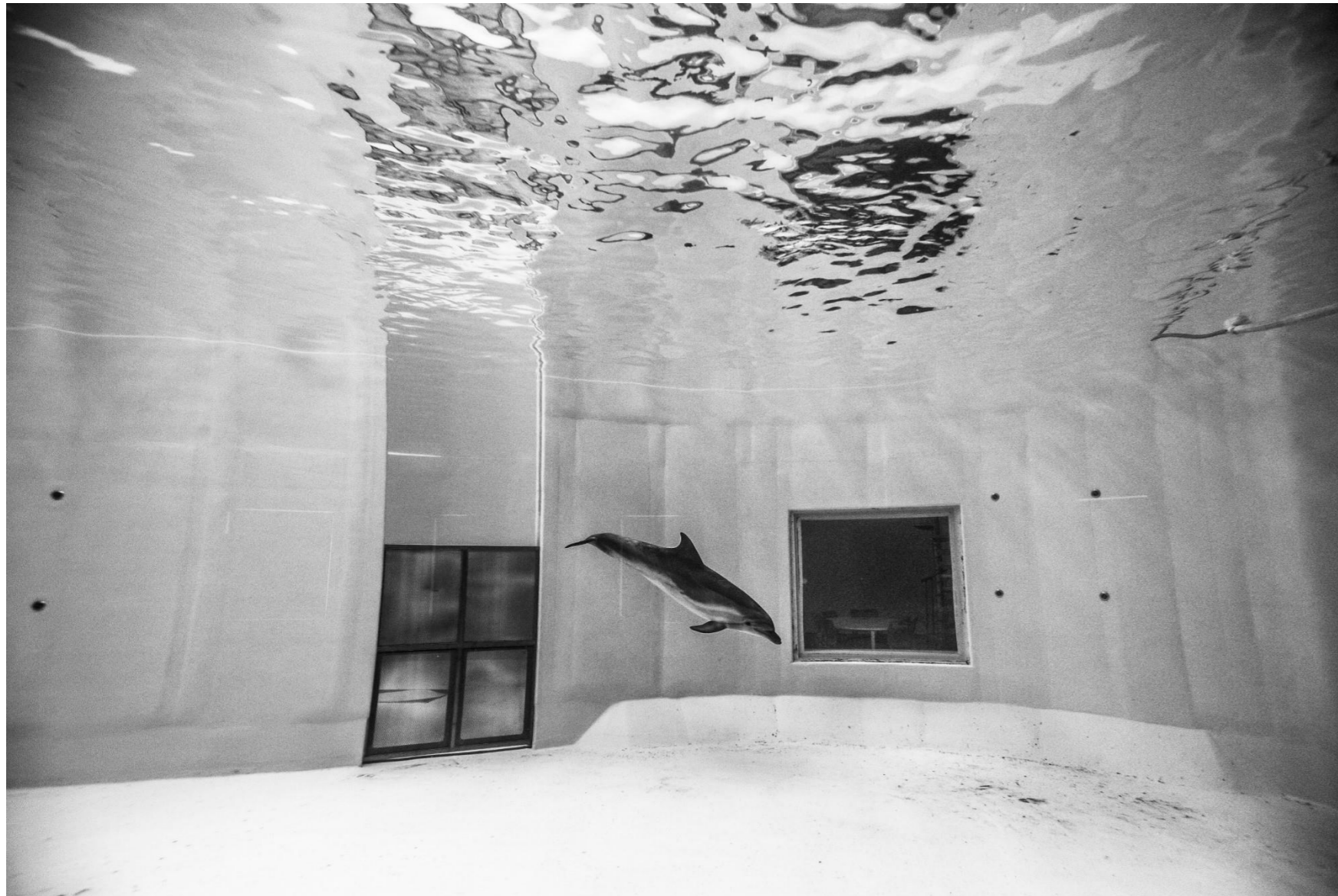
VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

1. Dolphins should **never have been caught** in the wild and kept captive
2. Dolphinarium cannot meet the needs of these complex social mammals and have created **tremendous suffering** and cost **many unnecessary deaths**
3. Dolphinarium are **monotonous environments** for complex, sensitive and intelligent individuals
4. Dolphinarium **cannot be justified** from a perspective of conservation, research or education
5. We need to do what is the **best interest of each individual dolphin**
6. The keeping and breeding of dolphins should be **legally prohibited**

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Immediate legal ban on breeding and importing cetaceans**
2. **Immediate legal ban on any direct contact public** with cetaceans
3. **No more cetacean shows** (focus paying audience, music spectacle), but interaction by caregivers with cetaceans on their own terms
4. Investment in **outdoor enclosure AND** aim for **relocation to seaside sanctuary**
5. **Permanent evaluation** with goal to relocate to seaside sanctuary
6. **'Owner' to take full financial responsibility** for retiring last cetaceans to seaside sanctuary



“Responsible tourism respects all animals. Therefore, there is no place for dolphin shows, wild animal circuses, elephant rides, trophy hunting or any activity which demeans, harms or disrespects them.”

Dr. Jane Goodall

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Credit images: R. Foster (slide 10), P. Fuller (sl 1 right, sl 11), GAIA (sl 19), D. L. Herzing (sl 5 top left, sl 29), M. Horrill (sl 5 top middle), L. Marino (sl 5 top right), Jo-Anne McArthur / Born Free Foundation / We Animals Media (sl 1 left, sl 33), Jo-Anne McArthur / One Voice / We Animals Media (sl 6), Miami Herald/TNS (sl 27 left), A. Natoli (sl 5 bottom left), S. Portelli (sl 12), S. Steyaert (sl 4), Studio Gang Architects (sl 28), C. Vinick (sl 5 bottom right), We Animals Media, Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society in Rose, Soller and Parsons (2023) (sl 20), Whale Sanctuary Project (sl 27 right) and C. Whiting (sl 9).

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