



Open Letter: Why Captive Dolphins should be moved to Seaside Sanctuaries

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Dear members of the Animal Welfare of the Flemish Parliament, dear Members of Parliament,

Dolphins are complex marine mammals, and due to their proximity to many countries as coastal residents, there is much we already know about them in the wild. *Tursiops truncatus* (common bottlenose dolphins which are often the dolphin species chosen by dolphinariums, such as Boudewijn Seapark) naturally live in home ranges that stretch hundreds of kilometers. In the wild, they dive hundreds of meters deep. They have evolved to thrive in rich ocean habitats, a world with seagrass meadows, diverse marine vegetation, tides and currents – vast areas that allow them to hunt for fish and other living food sources, socialize and form bonds. Dolphins live in fission-fusion communities, and strong evidence shows they exist in complex cultures consisting of pods that can consist of hundreds of individuals. They are extremely intelligent, have rich complex emotional and social lives, use tools and communicate using elaborate vocalizations. They can also sense their surroundings with sophisticated echolocation, meaning they are more animals of hearing than sight.

Dolphins do not belong in tanks; such captive environments are monotonous, empty and barren spaces. These artificial constructs cause frustration, stress and boredom. As a result, dolphins and other mammals with naturally diverse, large home ranges – like orcas and polar bears – tend to suffer from stereotypical behaviour and high infant mortality. This is the case with the Bruges dolphins. The breeding experiment in Bruges has been a tragic failure, costing the lives of multiple animals, and is a grim contrast to those living in the wild. But even if their young ones survived, lived long lives and bred successfully, they would still suffer from being held in an artificial, captive environment. Manufactured, non-natural environments such as tanks cannot provide dolphins with the complex psychological, social and environmental enrichment that they need. An artificial reality is simply not sufficient for these sentient, intelligent mammals. Recently, a dolphin passed away in a Swedish dolphinarium after suffocating on artificial seaweed – an example of well-intended behavioral enrichment that simply cannot replicate the natural world.

There is simply no justification for having dolphinariums. They are inappropriate, outdated remnants of the past. Bottlenose dolphins are not an endangered species in need of captive breeding programs. The so-called ‘educational shows’ consist of routine tricks that the dolphins learn to perform to survive on a diet of dead fish. There is no scientific or conservation value in keeping dolphins in captivity. Dolphinariums are circuses with loud music where tricks are performed on command to satisfy cheering audiences. These audiences learn nothing of the dolphin’s natural behavior – all they see is a shadow of the real animal, a trained performer who has no choice but to stage a show to simply survive. In order

to justify themselves, dolphinariums spread distorted information about the 'positive outcomes' of their trapped performers and divert attention to exaggerated dangers of living in the wild.

Times are changing. Research shows that the majority of people around the world are now opposed to the keeping of dolphins in tanks. Dozens of dolphinariums have closed their doors over the past years, and stringent legal requirements have been adopted. For example, governments in Canada, Croatia, Luxembourg, France, Switzerland and the United Kingdom have banned dolphinariums, banned live dolphin imports or strengthened regulation to the point where it is not cost-effective to build, and/or are actively phasing out existing facilities. Will Flanders join the groundswell against dolphins and whales in captivity?

Furthermore, we question how a study ordered by the Minister could recommend captive breeding, without mentioning any figures about the failed breeding program in Bruges? How can dolphins showing stereotypical behaviour and other serious welfare problems receive a welfare score of +80%? Some of the marine scientists endorsing this letter have investigated this study and the methodology and concluded that it does not stand up to scientific scrutiny. How could one of the three studies for the Minister, conducted by a consultant working for dolphinariums, focus on ethical considerations without involving ethicists? Many of us who are critical of this study prepared for the Minister are independent dolphin experts or ethicists. All of us would be more than willing to assist and provide pro bono accurate, complete and well researched scientific information and a fair and sound ethical evaluation.

We call upon each of you to make every effort to stop the keeping, breeding and importing of dolphins in Flanders, without exception. Now is the time to act. Not next year and certainly not within ten years. Research has demonstrated that major construction near a dolphin enclosure causes high levels of stress to these sensitive mammals. Outdoor pools have been scientifically shown to only have a demonstrable impact on the welfare of dolphins when aspects of their natural environment are replicated, such as sea pens with live fish.

Our world has evolved, we have become more aware and have a much better understanding of dolphins and whales, their intelligence, social structure, physical and psychological needs. Therefore, it is time to move captive dolphins to sea-side sanctuaries, such as the one in Lipsi in Greece. Some of us have visited this facility, which is run professionally by a reputable organization and is nearing completion. Such sea-side sanctuaries will allow former captive dolphins and whales a more natural life in more spacious and varied conditions, fulfilling their needs while receiving quality medical and other support. This will allow these animals, which have lived their lives in captivity, to have more freedom of choice – which is fundamentally important for their welfare.

This outcome also provides opportunities for the dolphin's current 'owners' to behave as responsible, compassionate and thoughtful caregivers. The Spanish owner of the Boudewijn Seapark, a multinational firm, can support the retirement of the Bruges dolphins, just as the National Aquarium in Baltimore, USA, is doing on ethical grounds. Staff could have the option of moving with the dolphins to a sanctuary. We have no doubt this show of empathy, understanding and care will reflect favorably on a national and international audience.

Finally, legally prohibiting dolphinariums will provide an important message that coastal sanctuaries are not 'dumping grounds' for dolphinariums that wish to continue breeding. Around the globe, many dolphinariums are at capacity. The studbook keeper of the European dolphin program suggested sending dolphins to Chinese dolphinariums.

We wish you every success with the Flemish Codex of Animal Welfare, but we implore you to please amend it, so that you open the option for a better future for the dolphins in Bruges. For too long, they have been swimming in circles within a small, chlorinated tank. We ask that you please do not miss this opportunity to improve the lives of these wide-ranging, sentient, complex mammals. We request that your determinations be based on full and accurate information, rather than biased reports. It is not too late to change your decision based on new, scientific information. And, if you do, this will be greeted with enthusiasm and heartfelt thanks from all who love and truly understand these amazing beings. You will be rewarded by the obvious joy of the dolphins themselves.

Thank you

Yours sincerely

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We are a group of zoologists, independent dolphin experts, ethicists and animal advocates. Our aim is to create the best outcomes for captive dolphins, based upon truthful, complete information and documented research. This is an initiative by the JGI Cetacean Committee, which is co-chaired by Melody Horrill and Dr. Koen Margodt and founded upon the request of Dr. Jane Goodall. Other members of the JGI Cetacean Committee are Dr. Jane Goodall, Dr. Denise Herzing, Dr. Soojin Jang, Dr. Lori Marino, Dr. Ada Natoli, Charles Vinick, Dr. Ingrid Visser and Sarah Wertkin.

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