

is captivity

Swimming with dolphins is a dream harboured by many. Those who have swum with these amazing, playful creatures often say that touching, feeding or swimming with dolphins is one of the most captivating experiences of their lives. Then why are so many animal welfare organisations campaigning against holding dolphins in captivity? Why are they against allowing people to experience the magic of swimming with dolphins? The truth is masked by the dolphin's smile. Dolphins are intelligent and social creatures that, in the wild, interact with hundreds of pod-mates, hunt communally and have entire coastlines as their playground. In captivity, all of this is lost. Establishing a complex social group in a limited space leads to high levels of stress for these creatures. Compared to their natural ocean home, tanks are small, cramped, bare and featureless. Captive dolphins are often restricted to swimming in circles, as compared to the average of 50 km a day that they cover in the wild. This environment causes stress, aggression, reduced life expectancy and breeding problems. Dolphins in captivity not only have to adjust to sudden confinement, but also to enforced interaction with humans. Furthermore, chemically treated water and UV exposure frequently cause ulcers and skin lesions. Undoubtedly, such a captive environment fails to provide for their behavioural or physiological needs. And all of this is on top of tremendous amounts of stress provoked by capturing the creatures in the first place and transporting them to their final destination.

There are currently over 800 bottlenose dolphins in captivity around the world. Although dolphins have been bred in captivity, the infant mortality rate is high and captive dolphin populations are not currently self-sustaining. Hence, dolphins are captured from the wild in order to maintain the numbers of captive dolphins. Tragically, for every wild dolphin taken alive, it is estimated that on average at least one other is injured or killed during the capture process. The methods of capture and transport of dolphins can be extremely cruel, and some dolphins die of shock in the process. Yet there are no international welfare standards for the management of dolphins in captivity. Despite animal rights concerns and questions about its efficacy, dolphin therapy is booming.



There are a number of organisations that offer Dolphin Assisted Therapy (DAT) for a wide range of special needs and psychological conditions. It is claimed that even brief exposure to these charismatic creatures is so uniquely rewarding that it produces benefits all by itself, thereby potentially jump-starting a patient's receptiveness to more conventional therapy. However, even after 20 years of research, there is still no proof that DAT is more effective than other animal-assisted therapies. Furthermore, if swimmers are not screened thoroughly, DAT can encourage the spread of human/cetacean diseases.

Dolphins have so much to offer us that very often we are ignorant to the fact that we are harming them in the process of interacting with them. When forced to constantly submit to people's desires to be near and touch them, dolphins experience great levels of stress, which can lead to significant health problems. There are still doubts about the educational value of dolphinariums and dolphin interaction programs and hence the claims for the educational value of these exhibits cannot be justified. Education and the raising of awareness can be done in so many other ways, through media such as books, documentaries, campaigns and websites. Sea World, one of the most recognised captive dolphin facilities in the United States, reported 93 dolphin deaths between 1971 and 2002, an average of three dolphins per year. We all love dolphins, and the captivity industry has capitalised on this to make huge profits at the expense of the animals' misery. Have we 'evolved' into a society that needs to disassociate animals from their natural habitats so that our young can learn about them?

The next time you consider visiting a captive dolphin facility, please think again. You could be funding the next