

Statement on Cetacean Captivity

The JGI Global Ethics Committee has published a statement calling for an immediate ban on capturing, keeping and breeding cetaceans in captivity.

Who isn't amazed by the sight of dolphins moving in large pods through the ocean, swimming in close formation, their backs appearing rhythmically above the waves while travelling at high speeds? A dolphin jumping out of the water, while spinning and turning, fills us with joy but also suggests that the dolphin is experiencing joy. We feel an immediate connection with these sentient, large-brained mammals. The huge dorsal fins of majestic orcas swimming as a tight family pod through misty waters fill us with a deep sense of awe.

Oceans are highly varied and rich ecosystems where cetaceans flourish in many ways. Cetaceans may travel tens of miles daily and frequently dive to depths greater than 450 meters [\[1\]](#). These intelligent mammals have complex social and emotional lives – for example, bottlenose dolphins live in fission-fusion groups, similar to the social structure of chimpanzees. Cetaceans demonstrate complex, collaborative hunting strategies and tool use. For example, dolphins will create a mud-ring around fish in shallow water, so that conspecifics can feed on the jumping fish. Some cover their beaks with sponges as a form of protection during foraging on the ocean floor. Cultural behaviour, including communication dialects, is passed on from generation to generation. These large-brained mammals are amongst the most intelligent organisms living on our planet.

Cetaceans in Captivity

Unfortunately, living conditions are starkly different for cetaceans in captivity. Cetaceans kept in dolphinariums include mainly bottlenose dolphins, but also orcas (or killer whales), belugas and porpoises. The history of cetacean captivity is in so many ways a tragic one. Their cruel capture in the wild is extremely disruptive and traumatic, resulting in broken bonds between mothers, calves and other pod members and unnecessary deaths.

Besides reduced life expectancy and limited breeding success, many problematic behaviours have been observed, such as aggression, passivity, self-mutilation and stereotypic behaviours. Captive cetacean behaviour is too often indicative of stress, frustration and boredom within the concrete walls of monotonous tanks. Some individuals have been kept in solitary confinement in tiny pens for years. Some dolphins have banged their heads against walls or crashed themselves into underwater windows. Many captive orcas have severe dental problems due to stress-related behaviour. They grind their teeth on the hard tank walls, even to the point where their nerves are exposed [\[2\]](#).

Cetaceans cannot escape social conflicts in captivity and facilities are often too limited for proper human intervention. Their sensory experiences are so different from ours. How do they experience living in water that is artificially treated with chlorine? How does their echolocation

system cope with their captive living conditions, surrounded by walls instead of the vastness of oceans? What is the impact of being surrounded by mechanical noise, loud music and the sound of large visitor crowds for these cetaceans?

Concrete tanks cannot meet the biological requirements of these intelligent, sensitive mammals who in the wild travel over large distances in social groups.

Cetacean Shows

Ever since television programs such as Flipper, dolphins and other cetaceans have been tremendously popular with the general public and made marine parks increasingly profitable. Cetaceans have been trained to perform repetitive tricks for the sake of a dead fish. Sometimes it is claimed that this shows cetacean intelligence – yet this in no way demonstrates their true intelligence any more than performing elephants in a circus educates the general public about their real intelligence.

And there's the human toll as well, as shown in the documentary Blackfish (2013). Orca shows have put the lives of trainers at severe risk, resulting in many injuries and the tragic loss of human lives. It is difficult to understand how the trainer's safety could be put at so much risk – for what purpose? Sustaining a living anachronism, a circus-like spectacle that is not befitting our growing sensitivity for animal welfare? ‘

Species conservation

From a species conservation perspective there is no need to take dolphins or orcas into captivity to join endangered animals for captive breeding in the ‘Zoo Ark’. The status of bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) is listed in the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) as being of [Least Concern](#). Orcas or killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) are listed as Data Deficient, but there are still more than 50,000 orcas in the wild [\[3\]](#). Spaces in zoos and aquaria are limited. If these want to be successful as conservation arks, they should focus on species listed as endangered that are truly in need of a breeding program. A conservation program with positive chances for reintroduction, as was the case for the Arabian oryx or California condor. Moreover, zoos and aquaria should focus on species whose basic needs can be addressed, where they can provide conditions that address the welfare of individual animals. Clearly, cetaceans do not fit any of these criteria. The keeping of cetaceans in captivity contradicts the concept of zoos as conservation arks for endangered species.

JGI's conclusion

The Jane Goodall Institute calls for an immediate worldwide, permanent ban on capturing, keeping and breeding cetaceans in captivity. In 2019 Canada passed legislation (Bill S-203) that will end the keeping of cetaceans in captivity [\[4\]](#). More recently, Bill S-241, also called the Jane Goodall Act, was introduced in Canada, which aims to strengthen animal law. If approved, this law may help relocate, among others, the lone orca female Kiska to the world's first whale sanctuary in Nova Scotia [\[5\]](#).

We need to investigate how we can offer the best possible future for those individuals already in captivity, such as life in a large semi-wild, marine sanctuary, or a carefully monitored reintroduction into the wild. In Korea, five bottlenose dolphins were successfully released in the wild after several years in captivity. The dolphins returned to their original pod and the three females Sampal, Chunsam and Boksoon later gave birth to babies in their natural environment [\[6\]](#). Recently, the last Korean bottlenose dolphin Bibong was released after having spent seventeen years in an aquarium [\[7\]](#).

For many years, Dr. Jane Goodall has expressed her deep concern about keeping cetaceans in captivity [8]. With all the scientific knowledge that has now been accumulated the ending of cetacean captivity is imperative and long overdue.

These wonderful creatures deserve nothing less than a natural life in the wild. We owe them nothing less than their freedom.

Authors

This statement is co-authored by Dr. Jane Goodall and Dr [Koen Margodt](#). It is endorsed by the other members of the JGI Global Ethics Committee; Dr. Marc Bekoff, Chris Heyde, Dr. Kerry Bowman, Mary Peng and Richard Quinn.

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Footnotes

- [1] See <https://doi.org/10.1644/05-MAMM-A-365R1.1> for bottlenose dolphins.
- [2] See <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/orcas-captivity-welfare>.
- [3] See <https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/22563/156932432> (bottlenose dolphins) and <https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/15421/50368125> (orcas).
- [4] See <https://openparliament.ca/bills/42-1/S-203/>.
- [5] See <https://whalesanctuaryproject.org/sanctuary-parliament-synchronicity/>.
- [6] See <https://whalescientists.com/captive-dolphins-release/>. Dr. Jane Goodall collaborated with Jae Choe to realize their reintroduction (see https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/560748.html).
- [7] See <https://www.upworthy.com/amp/last-captive-dolphin-in-south-korea-released-into-the-wild-2658468776>
- [8] See for example this video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aHidHMpJ6U> (2011) and a letter to the Vancouver Aquarium <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/jane-goodall-s-letter-to-the-vancouver-aquarium-1.1841649> (2014).