

Biting the Hand that Feeds: The Case Against Dolphin Petting Pools

WDCS exposes the cruelty of the increasingly popular dolphin “petting pools”.

The exploitation of dolphins in US amusement parks is highlighted in a report launched by WDCS and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) in 2003. We continue to call for the US Government to ban dolphin interaction programmes known as “Petting Pools”, and for the public to avoid visiting them, in response to research exposing their harmful effects.

The report, “Biting the Hand that Feeds, the Case Against Dolphin Petting Pools”, illustrates that Petting Pools, where the public are able to pet and feed captive dolphins for a fee, place both people and dolphins at risk. WDCS and The HSUS carried out almost one hundred hours of systematic observation in 1996 at Petting Pools found in Sea World parks across the US, with follow-up observations in subsequent years, up to and including 2002. The report exposes the unsafe, unsanitary and overcrowded conditions in which many captive bottlenose dolphins are forced to live.

The report shows many of the dolphins to be obese, due to inconsistent diets compounded by overfeeding from the public. The Petting Pool environment exposes dolphins to injury and stress from lack of sufficient refuge from the public. “Adequate supervision of the public by marine park staff at the pools is impossible,” said Cathy Williamson, WDCS’s Captivity Campaigner. “Items like paper fish containers, sunglasses and coins have been seen tossed or dropped into the pool. Each of these has the potential to cause gastrointestinal blockage, poisoning, or even death if ingested by the dolphins.” Fresh wounds, readily exposed to the unhygienic hands of visitors were also observed in some of the dolphins, during the research.

“The risk to the animals far outweighs any entertainment or educational value the public may get from these Petting Pools” stated Courtney Vail, US representative for WDCS. “We believe that these pools could also be putting wild dolphin populations at risk by teaching visitors that it’s ok to feed dolphins. In our

minds, there is a real conservation issue associated with Petting Pools.”

Petting Pool visitors are also at risk from physical harm. Due to their size and sheer numbers, dolphins frequently make abrupt and aggressive movements and occasionally aggressively compete for food. Several incidents of bites, head butts and trapped hands were observed during the research. Visitors were also seen holding young children out over the pool so they could touch the dolphins, clearly placing them at risk of falling in or sustaining an injury from contact with a dolphin. One child was seen being hit directly in the face by a dolphin interacting roughly with others.

As well as calling on the public not to visit amusement parks that include dolphin Petting Pools, WDCS and the HSUS are now calling for the US Government to ban these pools, which have fallen through the cracks of US Federal Government regulations. “Since marine parks have yet to do the right thing on their own and government agencies refuse to include Petting Pools in their regulations, we are asking the US Congress to shut these exhibits down,” said Dr Naomi Rose, marine mammal scientist for The HSUS.

The full report and an accompanying photo document are available in .pdf format and can be downloaded below. Photographs and video footage are available from WDCS.

The Humane Society of the United States has more than eight and a half million members and constituents. With programs in farm animals and sustainable agriculture, wildlife and habitat protection, companion animal and equine protection, and animal research, The HSUS protects all animals. Visit www.hsus.org.

Petting Pools action alert - What you can do to help

Please contact the following officials with your concerns, asking for the immediate closure of all petting pools.



Putting people and animals at risk: Petting pools bring dolphins into such close proximity that injuries result.

Contact Information:

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If you have been to an establishment with a petting pool, or are considering visiting one, we would like to hear your views on it. Please fill in and return our Petting Pool Survey Form. ■



Cuts and gashes on petting pool dolphins are frequent as the animals compete for the food being inexpertly delivered.