

# A FUTURE FOR THE BELUGAS IN SHANGHAI

## *The current situation:*

- Merlin has acquired several aquariums in Asia and Australia. One of them, in Shanghai, contains three belugas.
- WDC wants to end the shows - where the beluga do tricks - as soon as possible.
- Merlin and WDC wish to provide a more suitable environment for the belugas.
- We want the belugas to be returned to their home – the wild. But this will be a complex operation.

## THE FUTURE

### What we are working to achieve for the belugas

We don't want them to stay in captivity, so are working towards the best possible option. Moving the belugas to a location that offers them long term care in a more natural environment (and a chance to return to the wild) sends a very different message to the captivity industry and opens the door to a similar positive scenario for other belugas in captivity.

## *The issues:*

- 1 These belugas cannot simply be airlifted out of Shanghai and dropped into an ocean.
- 2 A team of experts needs to be assembled and the belugas assessed for their suitability for long distance travel and relocation to a sea pen or similar where they can adapt to more natural conditions.
- 3 Locations for rehab and possible release have to be carefully assessed in terms of the belugas' welfare and long-term survival. Environmental conditions need to be suitable to the species and provide a safe, unpolluted location where they can be cared for in the long term. The survival of the belugas may be placed at risk if they are placed in the wrong location.
- 4 While two of the belugas were captured in the same location in the White Sea, the third was captured in the Okhotsk Sea in Far East Russia. The three belugas are used to one another's company and careful assessment will need to be made following their relocation to a sea pen in a more natural environment as to whether they should remain together as a group or whether they may be suitable candidates for release.
- 5 Belugas are large mammals who spend their whole lives suspended in water. Lifting them from their current tank for transportation by truck and then plane can present a number of challenges. Very specialist equipment and experts with experience need to be involved in all stages of their transfer to ensure the health and welfare of the belugas is not put at risk. While belugas are routinely transported by the captivity industry, an increased mortality risk is seen in whales and dolphins following any transport.
- 6 In order to return the belugas to home waters, permits will need to be obtained to meet the requirements of CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. Regulations will have to be met in China and Russia and the Live Animal Regulations of the International Air Transport Association for the transport of whales will have to be met.
- 7 The finances involved are huge. Long distance transportation, the equipment involved and the long-term care of the belugas in a natural sea pen is going to be very costly.

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