



THE LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM

With work under way to establish sanctuaries for the retirement and rehabilitation of captive bottlenose dolphins and beluga whales, WDC captivity campaign manager Cathy Williamson explains how complicated the process to find and develop the right site really is

Whale and dolphin sanctuaries are firmly part of WDC's remit to address the need for an alternative future for more than 3,000 whales, dolphins and porpoises held in captivity. These individuals are kept in over 300 facilities in more than 50 countries. As aquaria and marine parks close and even the likes of SeaWorld announce a phase-out of orca captivity, sanctuaries are needed to provide a long-term future for those who cannot return to the wild. For those who can, sanctuaries will provide a suitable environment for them to undergo the necessary improvements in mental and physical health that will prepare them for a return to their ocean homes.

WDC is working on two sanctuary projects, for bottlenose dolphins and for belugas, with the global attractions company Merlin Entertainments. Merlin has acquired facilities

already holding captive whales and dolphins, but has also, as part of its SEA LIFE brand, taken a position against the keeping of whales and dolphins in captivity. Merlin recognises that the highly evolved sensory abilities and complex social structures of whales and dolphins make them unsuited to confinement in captivity, and so they asked WDC to work with them to create a better future for the whales and dolphins who come into their care.

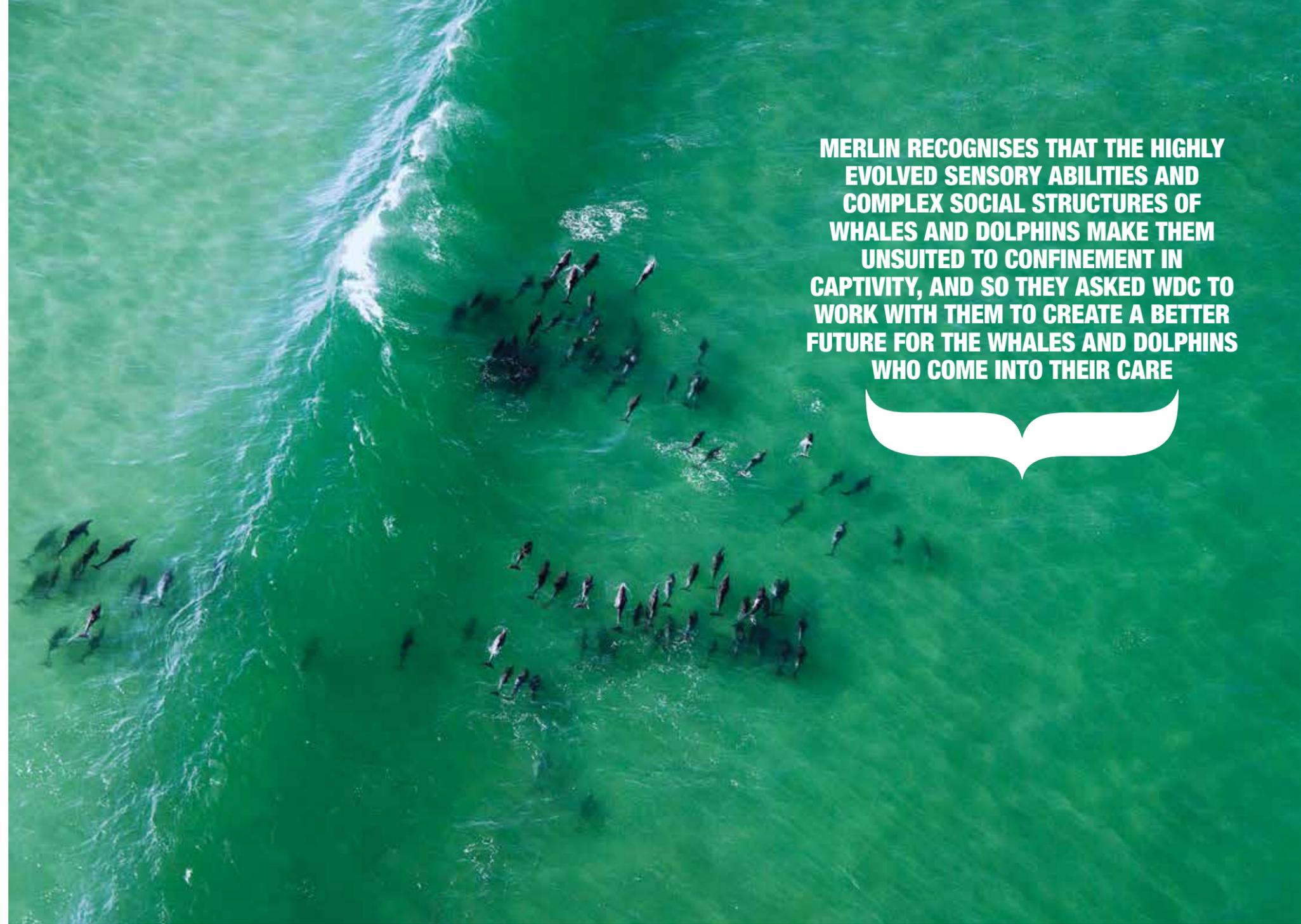


CATHY WILLIAMSON leads WDC's work to end whale and dolphin captivity

Thus began the long road to establishing the world's first permanent sanctuaries for captive whales and dolphins. But why does it seem to be taking so long?

To begin with, such a project has never been attempted before.

While similar projects exist for terrestrial species, there is currently no whale or dolphin sanctuary that provides a model for us to work to. So we are learning everything from scratch. It's been a steep learning curve!



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LOCATION LOCATION LOCATION

The most important and necessary first step to establishing our sanctuaries has been finding the right locations that are going to work for the individuals who will live there and the infrastructure needed to support them.

We have favoured coastal marine environments within the ranges for depth, temperature, salinity and PH that the species would naturally seek out. We have looked for areas large enough to accommodate several individuals (some of whom may need to be kept separately from one another), locations with a great deal more space than current captive facilities provide and ideally with enough space to encourage natural behaviour.

The area also needs to offer a wide range of movement while allowing for close contact with veterinary and other care staff.

We have looked for clean, pollution-free areas with sufficient tidal flow but protection from storms and high waves. We have also favoured areas which are easy to reach to bring in the individual whales and dolphins and staff and supplies, and also allow unintrusive visitor access. And local governmental and public support is vital. With all these criteria to meet, as well as gaining the necessary local and regional support, funding and permits, realising our dream has taken much longer than we might have hoped.

WHAT WILL SANCTUARIES LOOK LIKE?

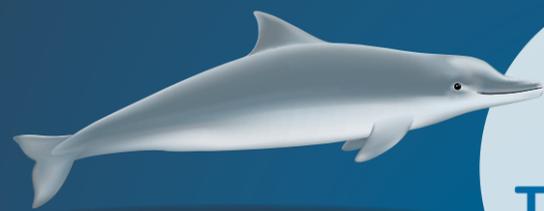
First and foremost, and in contrast to commercial facilities holding whales and dolphins around the world, the sanctuaries will be built and run for their whale and dolphin residents. Sanctuary design depends on location, and on the individuals being cared for, but ideally there would be a large area of varied depth and natural environmental enrichment enclosed by a sea pen. It's possible this would be combined with smaller enclosures within to separate incompatible individuals and, in some cases where contraception is not appropriate, to prevent breeding. Medical facilities would include a veterinary laboratory and separate medical

pool. The staff facilities, food preparation areas and visitor facilities would be located on land.

The sanctuaries will provide both temporary and permanent homes. Temporary – for those who are found to be suitable for a return to the wild. They will be rehabilitated and then moved to their native waters in a carefully managed release programme. Permanent – for those deemed unsuitable for release. These individuals will spend the rest of their lives in human care, but in a more natural environment, with more choice over their lives and who they interact with and how. We hope that most of them will recover health and fitness and behave and live more like their counterparts in the wild.

VITAL STATISTICS

What the ideal sanctuary sites for bottlenose dolphins and belugas whales should provide



BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN

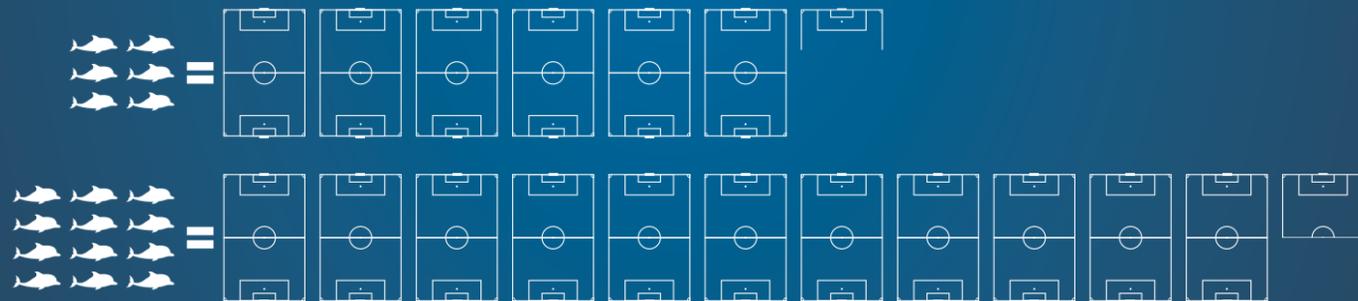
DEPTH: 3-10 METRES
PH: 7.6-8.2
TEMPERATURE: 55-60F (MINIMUM)
SALINITY: 25-35 PARTS PER THOUSAND

BELUGA WHALE

DEPTH: 2-10 METRES
PH: 7.2-7.8
TEMPERATURE: 57-59F (OPTIMAL)
SALINITY: 28-32 PARTS PER THOUSAND

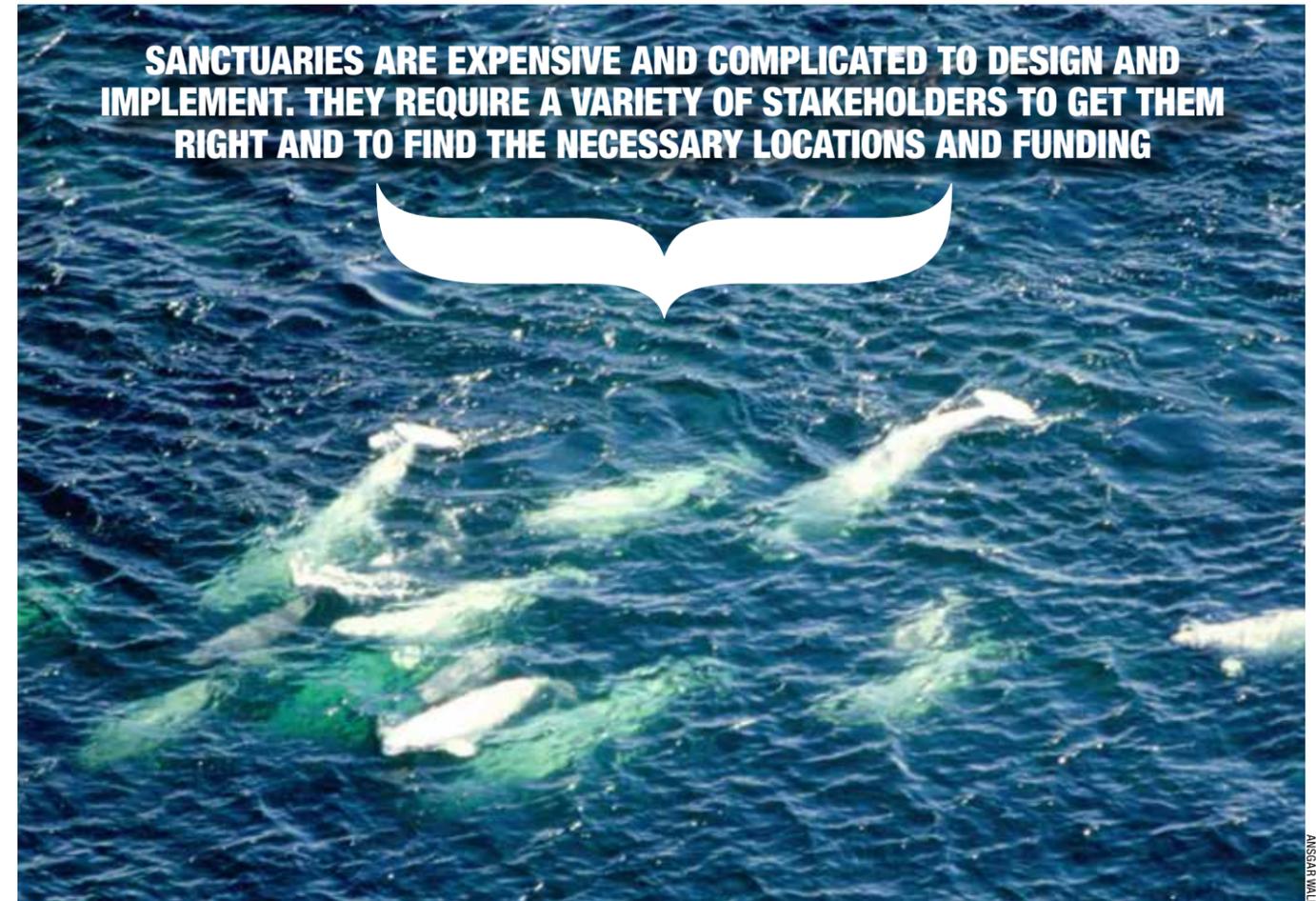
SANCTUARY SIZE

Estimated 45,000 square metres (approx 6.3 football fields) for six dolphins or belugas, rising to 75,000 square metres (approx 10.5 football fields) for 12



SANCTUARY REQUIREMENTS

- Needs to be a secure and quiet site, with limited nearby boat traffic and other disturbances
- Should allow space for husbandry, medical and research facilities on adjacent land
- A natural setting such as a sea-fed coastal bay or island site, preferably with a beach or other sheltered area that can be closed off using piles and netting
- Space for visitor facilities including an education centre and viewing platforms on land
- No excessively turbid water, major rivers or fresh water emptying into the site
- Access to good fish supplies, including snap-frozen fish at 10-15 lb per dolphin per day
- Site should offer protection from swell, winter storms and other adverse weather conditions, excessive tidal drop at low water (e.g. up to 6ft) and spring tide
- Accessible to local infrastructure, roads and airports, to facilitate provision of supplies and movement of the dolphins



The cost of establishing a sanctuary is going to be high – possibly up to £10 million. In providing lifelong care for many individuals, costs will continue to rise, perhaps into the tens of millions, but it is hoped that each sanctuary would eventually become financially stable through ticket sales, visitor donations and successful fundraising.

WHO IS INVOLVED?

The involvement of Merlin in these sanctuary projects brings with it the company's host of veterinarian and marine life experts, as well as experts in aquarium facility design and infrastructure, business and visitor experience. WDC has several staff from its Policy team, including End Captivity team members Cathy Williamson and Rob Lott, involved in the projects providing whale and dolphin expertise, including advice on whale and dolphin welfare, research and public education. Other independent whale and dolphin specialists are also advising on how the developing sanctuary designs will impact on the daily lives of the whales and dolphins destined to live there. These experts are also helping to prepare these captive individuals for relocation to their new environment.

TAKING THE NEXT STEP

Sanctuaries are expensive and complicated to design and implement. They require a variety of stakeholders to get them right and to find the necessary locations and funding. Their finer details are dictated by the individual whales and dolphins who will live in them and by the opportunities and challenges presented by the chosen location. Contingency planning is vital to take into account all possible eventualities, including some that might not be envisaged.

Perhaps most importantly, expectations must be managed. Whales and dolphins are vulnerable to handling and transport and to relocation to new environments. The risk of death rises significantly every time they are moved.

Nevertheless, remaining in captivity presents a significantly higher risk to health and welfare, and that could be improved by relocation to a sanctuary.

Relocation and adaptation to this new environment therefore needs to be very carefully planned and handled.

There is a great deal of work to do to establish sanctuaries for the thousands of whales and dolphins in captivity around the world, including raising the necessary funds to do so. WDC is at the forefront of this work and is currently investigating

potential locations for both bottlenose dolphin and beluga sanctuaries.

We hope that if and when funds are secured, surveys bring positive results and permits are obtained, so that construction on one or both sanctuaries begins in the next two to three years. Meanwhile, the

capture and imprisonment of whales and dolphins continues

and we will put all the necessary efforts into addressing that, while at the same time working to provide them with a better future. ■

