

BACK WHERE THEY BELONG

Is there a chance that, one day, all captive dolphins could be returned to the seas? Rob Hicks of SEA LIFE has a plan

Julia Thoms, *Whale & Dolphin* editor, brings you exciting news of a world first!

There is an issue that has always faced those of us who campaign for an end to whale and dolphin captivity, and indeed those within the captive display industry who have moved to the belief that these intelligent and wide-ranging creatures are just not suitable for confinement. If we close down these facilities – what happens to the whales and dolphins who are held there? There has been no long-term and realistic answer to this question.

Until now, that is. WDC and Merlin Entertainments are working in partnership to create the world's first Dolphin Sanctuary. This Sanctuary will exist to rehabilitate, release and retire captive dolphins. The goal will always be to release the dolphins brought into its care, back to the wild after a period of rehabilitation. But, in some cases, it may just be too cruel to release.

Such individuals will be rehabilitated and taught to catch live prey – some may well

have to go through withdrawal from medication – and then they will be retired into huge sea pens at the Sanctuary, where they will live a more natural life without being forced to perform.

As it has expanded, Merlin has bought some visitor attractions, which also hold whales or dolphins, and they will work with WDC experts to release or retire these individuals through Sanctuary initiatives.

WDC believes that it is much better that these dolphins have come into Merlin's care and begun their journey to freedom than been sold to SeaWorld or someone else who would continue to force them to perform and remain in confinement.

Our goal is that this Sanctuary will care first for the dolphins acquired by Merlin and then will be opened to other facilities who want to see the dolphins held in their tanks, returned to their ocean homes.

Here, Rob Hicks of SEA LIFE gives his perspective and tells us why this Sanctuary will fulfil a childhood dream...

Rob Hicks has a dream. 'I was once standing on a cliff top on a sunny day in southwest Britain,' he says, 'when I saw some dolphins. They were taking it in turns to ride the surf into the beach of a secluded bay. What a sight it was. Is it possible to recreate it for captive dolphins as part of their possible reintroduction to the wild? Well, that's my dream.'

It's an impressive one, but it's possible. Rob is Displays Development Director at SEA LIFE, part of the Merlin Entertainments group. SEA LIFE has more than 40 aquaria around the world, and is proud of the quality of care for their animals, which are never made to perform for public entertainment, or indeed do anything that would distress them or change their behaviour. In short, SEA LIFE is a very different organisation to the similarly named SeaWorld.

Now, in partnership with WDC, SEA LIFE is looking into developing a sanctuary, somewhere in the world, that would act as a reintroduction for captive dolphins into a

Could all dolphins
one day be free?



more natural environment.

‘Initially the new Sanctuary will cater for the dolphins currently in Merlin’s care,’ says Rob, ‘but in the longer term we would look to broaden this. Our aspiration would be to provide the means for them to lead as natural an existence as possible within the Sanctuary boundaries while we assess each individually to determine its longer-term future. For example, we would see whether it might be suitable to release them into the open sea, or whether the dolphin is likely to need a degree of human care for the rest of its life.’

You may have noticed that Rob mentioned dolphins in Merlin’s care just then. So do they have animals in captivity themselves?

‘Given Merlin’s fast growth, we have at times acquired businesses which historically have included shows or displays which involve whales or dolphins,’ says Rob. ‘In our view,

this has never been a reason not to take on a good business which reflects many of our values – on the contrary, through our actions, Merlin can hopefully improve such situations. Our objective from the outset is always to work with the local teams and relevant experts to develop plans which we believe are in the best interest of the animals involved. The welfare of the animals in our care is at the forefront of everything SEA LIFE does.



ROB HICKS

is Displays
Development
Director
at SEA LIFE

‘This is why Merlin has its own very powerful ethics committee monitoring all our activities – and the views of this committee overrides all other commercial considerations. This committee includes independent experts

(including representation from WDC), policing every aspect of our husbandry and safeguarding the interests of the creatures in any future planning. When we acquired Brighton Aquarium and its

dolphinarium back in 1990, for example, the decision not to retain the dolphins was taken even before we signed the contract.

‘Personally, I have always believed that whales and dolphins should not be in captivity – even from a very young age, as a marine biologist in waiting (more years ago than I care to or can remember). As I started to look for work during my university holidays I was very happy to find a company that operated aquariums and had the same view as myself. I luckily found myself a job as a seasonal aquarist and have not looked back since.

‘It’s always been SEA LIFE’s policy to display only species which we believe can flourish in well maintained and operated facilities. The view of our in-house marine experts is that whales and dolphins are highly social, highly intelligent animals with acute sensory abilities which cannot be managed in captive facilities. Interestingly this view is also held by many of our team whose background is in areas other than the care of our animals.

‘I have to say that it is always personally

very challenging for me when a dolphinarium or other similar display is part of any planned acquisition. However, I also appreciate that Merlin's involvement provides me with the catalyst and opportunity to start on the road to change across the industry – and to impact very positively on these creatures. We know however that unless and until we find the best suitable alternative for the animals we often come under the spotlight of the very many animal welfare organisations that campaign on the captivity issue, and that nothing we do as a commercial operation is ever good or fast enough. This can be very frustrating, particularly when the comment is ill-informed and the solutions offered not in the best interests of the very creatures they look to help! In spite of this we feel we are better placed than other potential purchasers of such attractions to secure a better future for such animals.'

In order to drive towards the best standards of care, SEA LIFE works closely with experts, and particularly WDC. 'I remember, for example, back in the days when your current chief executive, Chris Butler-Stroud, was your campaigns manager, collaborating with him to stop the import of illegally-obtained whale skeletons from Norway.

'Over the years, and following conversations with all the WDC key players to ensure that both sides felt confident that our attitudes and working practices were complementary, we have moved from ad hoc projects to a closer working partnership on longer-term projects. WDC has the scientific expertise, credibility and resources to make a real difference on such issues and we are proud to be working with them.'

And so onto that Sanctuary. 'It's a huge challenge,' says Rob. 'We have to find a suitable location and they are not as readily identifiable as people might imagine. Working with WDC we have already found a few that raised our hopes, but on further detailed investigation they have to date almost all thrown up insurmountable obstacles.

'For example, we all recently thought that we were all-but-there with a site in the



OLGA KIKOU

'IN 20 YEARS' TIME I EXPECT TO SEE A CHANGE IN THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE TREATMENT OF WHALES AND DOLPHINS IN CAPTIVITY'

Mediterranean, but the subsequent collapse of some European economies delayed the whole process.

'What is needed is a good-sized natural sea inlet, or possibly even a disused man-made harbour. Once we have the right site – and one which we are able to purchase or lease on terms which guarantee a long-term presence – we then need to be able to construct a barrier across the mouth.

'We also have to look at providing staff facilities, including the ability to get both people and provisions to the location with ease. To do all this, most importantly we need the complete support of the relevant local community. In fact, anyone who may have access to land and a secluded bay, ideally off the Mediterranean Sea, and who would be interested in helping to support this project – please contact me or WDC.

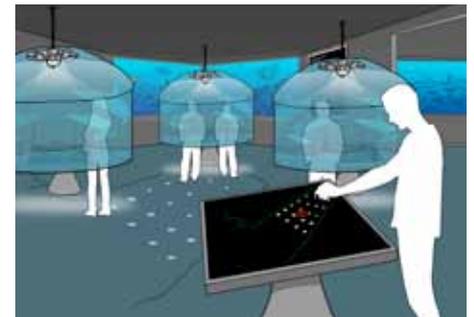
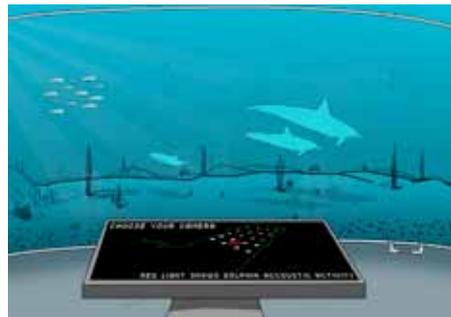
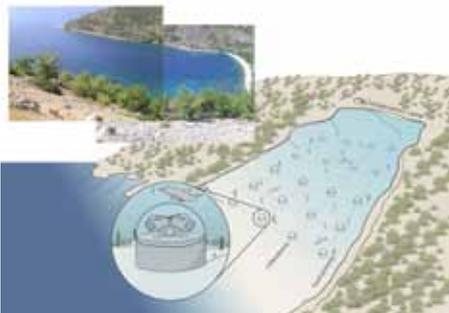
'Finally, we need to be able to move the dolphins there without the journey subjecting them to undue stress. It really is a logistical nightmare... but we are not deterred. We will

succeed because we have to, and I want to.'

'Ultimately, we might be able to develop a global network of Sanctuaries. SEA LIFE already has five Seal Sanctuaries around Northern Europe and has assisted in funding a rescue facility for loggerhead turtles in Zakynthos. Rescue Rehabilitate and Release is a key activity of SEA LIFE with over 150 animals passing through last year alone from orphaned seals to chill-shocked turtles.'

The goals may be a long way off, but Rob is hugely optimistic. 'In 20 years' time I expect to see a change in the public perception of the treatment of whales and dolphins in captivity,' he says, 'resulting in the closure of the majority of the dolphinarium around the globe.

'I hope that Merlin's very clear stance, ie looking for solutions to reduce the number of cetaceans being held in concrete tanks, will open the flood gates to allow other organisations to take similar concepts forward as solutions for their animals. There is, I believe, already a turning tide on captivity of whales and dolphins.'



These artist's impressions show a possible way to observe the dolphins' behaviour with no disturbance. People from all over the world will be able to visit the facility, which will create an unprecedented experience. Observance of the retired dolphins would be through one-way glass.