Ethically phasing out captivity

Keeping whales and dolphins in captivity for human entertainment is cruel and must come to an end as soon as possible.

In an ideal world, all captive facilities would close today, and every whale and dolphin would be instantly released from captivity to live wild and free. But the reality is that enforced confinement – which for many has spanned their entire lives – may have robbed these individuals of the natural skills and behaviours needed to survive in the wild.

Sanctuaries and rehabilitation establishments are the most ethical solution for freeing whales and dolphins from captivity. However, there are around 3,600 captive whales and dolphins, but only a handful of legitimate sanctuaries and rehabilitation facilities around the world. WDC are doing all we can to facilitate the creation of these establishments and, where they exist, we encourage their vital work.

Sanctuaries and rehabilitation facilities take a considerable amount of time and money to build and maintain. The whales and dolphins who endure each day in captivity cannot wait for humanity to build enough of these facilities before they are freed from their present confinement – particularly as most would continue to suffer and could die in the meantime.

The captive whale and dolphin industry and the tour operators that support them, must take immediate steps to mitigate some of the wrong that’s been done by transforming the lives of these whales and dolphins where they are today.

For this reason, WDC calls for all current facilities which hold whales and dolphins in captivity to immediately:

- **Pledge to never again participate in or profit from the exploitation of whales and dolphins kept in captivity for entertainment**
  Captive establishments and the tour operators that support them must commit to an immediate ethical phase out of the keeping of whales and dolphins in captivity. This includes adapting their business model so that they play their part in bringing the captivity of whales and dolphins to a permanent end and educating tourists to know that whales and dolphins belong in the ocean, wild and free.

- **End performances and ban public interactions**
  Whales and dolphins who are encouraged or persuaded to perform certain actions are forced to endure cruel training methods\(^1\) which distort their natural behaviours\(^2\) and put them at risk of stress and physical harm\(^3\). Interactions with the public, such as in ‘swim-with-dolphins’

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1. The most common training method uses food as a primary positive reinforcer. This means that satisfaction of hunger is dependent on performing tricks. Hunger is deliberately induced so the reinforcer will be effective, which reduces some dolphins to little more than beggars and their lives obsessively revolve around the food presented during shows, human interactions and training sessions.
2. Performing whales and dolphins are trained to demonstrate a series of conditioned behaviours. Many are based on natural behaviours that are performed out of context which are exaggerated and altered almost beyond recognition. The repetitive nature of these conditioned behaviours differs fundamentally from the spontaneous expression of behaviours in nature, where the individuals choose what they do and decide how to spend their time.
3. Having to perform in shows is not only demeaning to the whales and dolphins, but they can also get hurt. As well as potential injuries to their skin, fins or snout while interacting with trainers in shows, whales and dolphins have also been seriously injured and even killed while performing tricks.
activities, are wholly unnatural and constant exposure to humans unfamiliar to them is more likely a source of stress than enrichment.

- **Commit not to add to the number of whales and dolphins currently in captivity by ending captive breeding and refusing to accept whales and dolphins who have been captured from the wild**

  Continuing captive breeding is unethical⁴ and means that greater numbers of whales and dolphins are born into the cruelty caused by captivity. For live captures to take place, wild populations are hunted, and many are removed from their groups, which often results in the infliction of injuries or death to the individuals being sought and other group members⁵. Captive establishments and tour operators must not passively or actively increase the number of whales and dolphins who are forced to suffer lives of captivity.

- **Prohibit all transportation of whales and dolphins (unless it is to a sanctuary or rehabilitation establishment, or in special circumstances, to a facility with higher welfare provisions)**

  Every transportation is as traumatic to a dolphin as a capture from the wild. They never get used to being restrained and moved between enclosures, and the stress considerably increases their risk of dying. Transportation and changing location must only be carried out when it is going to lead to improved welfare for the whale or dolphin, as the stress of coping with the transportation and adapting to a different environment and social relationships is huge.

- **Facilitate the retirement of captive whales and dolphins to legitimate sanctuaries and rehabilitation establishments**

  The tourism industry must facilitate the retirement of captive whales and dolphins to genuine sanctuaries where individuals can live the rest of their lives in a more natural environment or, where possible, be returned to the wild. A non-profit sanctuary can provide ex-captive whales and dolphins with more natural surroundings, more space and more choice in their daily lives, providing a better quality of life. The tourism industry can commit resources to work with WDC to ensure that there are more viable and responsible environments for captive whales and dolphins to be moved to.

- **Provide every welfare measure possible for captive whales and dolphins within their current environment**

  Sadly, not all captive whales and dolphins can be moved to a sanctuary or rehabilitation environment immediately. Welfare standards for those remaining in captivity must be strengthened, particularly with regard to enclosure sizes, diet, socialisation, the prevention of breeding and environmental enrichment.

WDC wishes that every whale and dolphin held in captivity for profit or entertainment could instantly be moved to a sanctuary or rehabilitation environment and that all current captive entertainment facilities would close. But, with very few true sanctuaries in the world that individuals can be moved to, if the existing captive facilities in Europe close, there is a horrifying likelihood that the whales and dolphins would die.

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⁴ Whales and dolphins in captivity are often encouraged to breed in an attempt to sustain the captive population due to the mortality rates and the high financial value of new whales or dolphins. Inbreeding is a serious concern for many facilities because of the artificial group structure, and so natural reproduction is often replaced with artificial insemination. Artificial insemination usually requires female dolphins to be drugged with diazepam (the generic of Valium) prior to the insemination procedure, which is invasive, undignified and is likely to be very painful.

⁵ Live captures of wild whales and dolphins are invasive, stressful and can potentially be fatal to the individuals involved and their social groups. When whales and dolphins are captured from the wild, the suffering they undergo is multiplied as they endure being seized and removed from the life and individuals they know, transported to facilities far away, and suffering the rest of their life in captivity.
would be sold to the growing market for attractions with captive animals in Asia, resulting in their increased suffering.

We therefore call on captive facilities and the tour operators who promote them to immediately adopt our ethical phase out approach to ensure that the remaining population of whales and dolphins in captivity is not added to through breeding or further live captures.

With your support, we can ensure that this is the last generation of whales and dolphins that has to suffer in captivity. While we work hard to move as many as possible to ethical sanctuaries and rehabilitation facilities, the tourism industry must guarantee that captive whales and dolphins are never again subjected to the cruelty of performing or interacting for entertainment, enduring artificial insemination, or being captured from the wild.