



Swimming With Dolphins: A Well-Meaning but Harmful Practice

© 2015 EthicalTraveler.org / Reporting by Susan Getty

*Ethical Traveler¹, in an effort to provide readers with advice on how to travel the world with minimum negative impact, has made a commitment to call out forms of tourism which cause suffering for animals. **This brief summarizes our position against “swim with the dolphin” (SWTD) programs.***

During the past two decades, the opportunity to “swim with the dolphins” (SWTD) has become an increasingly popular tourist activity, often topping travelers’ “bucket lists.” At the same time, our knowledge about dolphins has increased—along with our awareness of how marine mammals suffer in the name of entertainment (graphically illustrated in such films as *The Cove* and *Blackfish*).

This dichotomy is reflected by the fact that while some countries have banned the display of all cetaceans, others — including many destinations frequented by cruise ships— have seen an increase in attractions where one can not only swim with dolphins, but touch them in petting pools and even spend a day as their “trainer.” Though these opportunities may sound enticing, Ethical Traveler suggests avoiding SWTD facilities.

The capture of wild dolphins for such facilities involves inhumane techniques, such as isolating whole pods and chasing dolphins to the point of exhaustion. Furthermore, evidence suggests that capture increases the risk of death for both the captured and the remaining dolphins. Stress for the captured can increase mortality, while the removal of this individual from the pod can result in social trauma, as individual dolphins have been found to play a key role in the cohesion of their communities.

¹ Ethical Traveler is a 501(c)3 project of the Earth Island Institute.

In addition, SWTD environments (in fact, any captive environment) simply cannot meet the needs of such intelligent and mobile creatures. In the wild, a dolphin will swim anywhere from 40-90 miles each day, dive hundreds of feet, and reach speeds of up to 30 mph (about 50 kph). All SWTD tanks - many only six feet deep - are far too small to permit this freedom.

Dolphins are considered by many scientists to be more intelligent than apes. Their brain composition suggests the ability to empathize and intuit, understand abstract concepts, and experience a wide range of emotions (such as grief and anger). They also have highly complex social structures, and transfer survival information from generation to generation, possessing what we would label as culture. SWTD facilities disrupt these relationships by removing select dolphins from the wild, and forcing unfamiliar dolphins together in small spaces designed for easy cleaning and animal handling, rather than for providing a diverse and stimulating environment for an intelligent mammal.

Proponents of SWTD and other public display programs argue that keeping these animals captive leads to advancements in conservation and research, and increases educational opportunities. These claims do not hold up under scrutiny. Data-supported evidence that public display facilities increase a visitor's knowledge of marine mammals is virtually non-existent. At many public display facilities, educational material is unavailable or, when present, scientifically incorrect or intentionally misleading.

The assertion that public display facilities contribute greatly to conservation and research is similarly flawed. Most dolphins bred in captivity are bottlenose dolphins, whose population is not generally considered to be under threat of extinction. The fact that bottlenose dolphins are the most commonly bred in captivity, and the fact that less stable species are bred less often, suggests that financial benefit, not conservation, is the main motive behind these facilities. Moreover, many public display facilities acquire their dolphins from the wild without first determining the impact of such capture on local populations, and the research conducted on captive dolphins has proven to be largely non-transferable to wild populations.

SWTD programs harm dolphins physically as well. Many dolphins involved in SWTD programs develop blisters and sores from prolonged exposure to the sun—the result of shallow tanks. To keep bacteria levels safe for tourists and trainers, tank water is often treated with chlorine, which has been reported to cause blindness. Captive dolphins are routinely given ulcer and anti-anxiety medications and antibiotics to counter infection, and must take vitamins and minerals to supplement their unnatural and insufficient diet of dead fish.

There are some hazards unique to sea pens, such as exposure to hurricanes, falling water levels and increasing temperatures, and lack of adequate refuge. In addition, sea pen facilities may damage the local reef environment as dolphin feces and other waste accumulate through inadequate tidal flow.

Beyond the risks to the animals and the environment, SWTD programs can be unsafe for participating tourists. Trainers and participants who make contact with marine mammals have reported rashes, while one study noted that one fifth of trainers in surveyed public display facilities had developed respiratory infections, including tuberculosis. Dolphins have been reported to push tourists, to prevent tourists who were feeding them from leaving the tank, and to cause broken bones, lacerations, abrasions and even death.

For these reasons and more, Ethical Traveler strongly encourages tourists to avoid SWTD programs. Instead, consider visiting dolphins in their natural habitat, from shore or on a dolphin watch excursion (visit www.responsibletravel.com or www.dolphinmart.org for help finding a responsible operator). For more information on the problems with SWTD programs, see the resources listed below.

Sources (as of July 21st, 2015):

Whale and Dolphin Conservation

<http://us.whales.org/issues/swimming-with-dolphins>

Right Tourism

<http://right-tourism.com/issues/animals-attractions/swimming-with-dolphins/#sthash.gsqn9ajP.dpbs>

Foundation for the Adoption, Sponsorship and Defense of Animals

<http://faada.org/causas-en-17-nadar-con-delfines>

World Animal Protection

<http://www.worldanimalprotection.us.org/our-work/animals-wild/marine-animals-captivity>

The Case Against Marine Mammals in Captivity

http://www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/marine_mammals/case_against_marine_captivity.pdf

ENDCAP

<http://endcap.eu/dolphinaria/>