

**Submission
No 176**

**INQUIRY INTO EXHIBITION OF EXOTIC ANIMALS IN
CIRCUSES AND EXHIBITION OF CETACEANS IN NEW
SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: CETASEA Association

Date Received: 24 November 2019



**Submission to the inquiry about display of captive cetaceans of the
Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No.4 of the Parliament of New
South Wales**

**by Benjamin Schulz, Director of Conservation, Marine Mammal
reproduction biologist, CETASEA Association, European project for
marine mammal sanctuaries**

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

It came to our attention that you are currently running an inquiry about the display of captive cetaceans in your state. We found the inquiry not adequate to express our ideas and explain some important facts to consider when thinking about changing legislation that impacts the welfare of captive cetaceans, which is why we are sending a personalized submission.

First of all, we as a non-profit organization of marine mammal scientists in Europe are aware of the fact that the keeping and care of captive cetaceans is a complicated matter and which has come under fire of certain animal rights interest groups and the public opinion as well. Living conditions in many outdated and small facilities are undoubtedly substandard and not suitable for many needs of cetaceans regarding their physical activity, social behavior as well as their suspected high intelligence. This is the reason why we are promoting the development of new habitats that are commonly known as "sanctuaries". These consist of large, natural sea-side enclosures that allow cetaceans to live again in real sea-water and experience the enrichment of their natural ecosystem.

We do believe that in the case of captive cetaceans in New South Wales, this could be a good solution for the local captive group of bottlenose dolphins. However, there are certain limitations arising from the special situation of the group at Coffs Harbour that can be very detrimental to the health and welfare of these individuals if these are not considered during the process of conceiving new legislation. Unfortunately, we have been experiencing in several countries before that such legislative processes do not result in any improvement in animal welfare, but in fact even decrease living conditions further due to consequences that were not thought through during the process. We hope that we can hereby help make you aware of the needs of captive cetaceans and the consequences

you might not see at this time that your future decisions will have.

The local group of dolphins currently living in the Coffs Harbour facility consists of two adult, formerly rescued animals and their offspring. This is currently posing the most critical problem at this place, even before the small holding pools. We have been reading from the scientific director of that facility recently that they do not intend to breed further with their animals, which however is not really any decision one could voluntarily make, but which is implied by the situation that the maturing offspring will start to reproduce with their parents or siblings and produce inbred calves. To prevent this, either contraception or permanent separation are needed.

The use of contraception in cetaceans poses serious problems, as currently there simply is no reliable and safe long-term method for them. Contrary, contraceptions in male dolphins simply do not work and in female dolphins have very serious health side effects leading to suppressed immune systems and early death if they are continuously administered. Surgical methods are not possible in dolphins due to the inability to make them survive any kind of intraabdominal surgeries. That inevitably leaves permanent separation of genders as the only option to prevent further reproduction. In the case of the Coffs Harbour group, this would lead to one three-individual male and a two-individual female group, which both are just unacceptable numbers regarding the social needs of these animals. Also, serious mental and physical problems will occur caused by the unnatural stop of reproduction, which is an important part of dolphin society and their physiology. Aggression, sickness and even self-inflicted injuries do regularly occur in captive dolphins that are prevented from mating.

Unfortunately, both many captive facilities but also sanctuary projects proposed by animal rights groups completely neglect the urgency and relevance of a proper breeding and population management. To summarize, if the Parliament of New South Wales decides to install a breeding ban on these cetaceans, that will not change anything for the situation of the local group of dolphins. Also, if these animals are moved into a natural seaside sanctuary, then habitat enrichment might be improved, but the critical social situation still persists. Whatever the Parliament of New South Wales decides, it will not help these animals. Only a cooperation and an installment of a proper cetacean population management in all of Australia (so actually just Queensland with the other facility keeping captive dolphins) could help improve these animals lives.

The creation of a seaside sanctuary that combines animals of both facilities to enable the necessary social and genetic exchange will benefit both the animals that are moved into this habitat as well as those that are remaining in the Queensland facility. We want to express at this time again that the improvement of captive dolphins' welfare is not about banning reproduction or captivity, but it is about providing better living conditions and establishing a scientifically managed reproduction program. Under proper conditions, cetaceans can thrive in human care and this should be the goal of every serious conservation plan. We are currently facing a dramatic decline of species, habitat loss and climate change and while we all still don't know the consequences of our actions yet, it is clear that many animals will depend on captive breeding for survival. This is especially true for marine mammals with their slow reproduction and sensitive response to environmental changes.

Sanctuaries that are conceived as an enhancement of current captive facilities can provide for the role of a genobanking approach to conservation where captive-born animals have the chance to go back into more natural, but still captive habitats and where they themselves can produce offspring that will be more suited for future reintroduction into the wild. Just sending animals into sanctuaries to die there without the chance of procreation however serves no good to anyone. Cetaceans prioritize family before habitat, as they certainly possess a sense for affection and bonding, but surely not for

purely aesthetic aspects.

Australia at this point still has the potential to form a powerful conservation alliance between the two current captive facilities and with one or more sanctuary projects that are willing to see themselves as servants to the dolphins welfare and partners/teachers of the current facilities instead of as enemies of captivity. If humans in this matter truly want to achieve an improvement for the welfare of the animals and a chance for conservation, they stop thinking in frontlines and set aside their personal opinions (which is the only material that a public inquiry will produce) to work together on a solution. For sure the heated atmosphere in regards to cetacean captivity will provide a lot of opinions that intend to do only the best for the animals by being completely against their keeping, but the pure number of these voices do not mean they have the right solution. In this case, the truth backed by scientific facts is that a radical stop of captivity will harm the animals more than it will do any good to them, and polarisation of opinions and procedures will not help to provide the right answers. Only cooperation and creativity will make a change that really serves the protagonists of this discussion, the cetaceans.

This is what CETASEA is about in Europe, and we would be happy to see a good development happen in Australia as well. We have connections all over the world, including your country and will gladly provide further consultation for the Parliament of New South Wales in this matter. Please do not hesitate to contact us and inform yourself about all the details of our concept and plans.

Yours sincerely,

Benjamin Schulz, Director of Conservation, CETASEA Association