



A Plea for the Animals: Dolphins Are Not Toys

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Matthieu Ricard and some animal friends

The dolphinarium industry is a perfect example of institutionalized selfishness. Money is the driving force that creates and runs them. Their educational, recreational, and environmental facades are covers for the merciless enslavement of species gifted with rare intelligence and who enjoy a rich and complex social life.

In the people who run such businesses we find only hypocrisy, profiteering, and disinformation. In the public, we see one example out of many of cognitive dissonance: We just love these marine mammals – they're so “cute”; documentaries are dedicated to their majesty; we make stuffed toys and key chains in their likeness. But we also make their life a living hell.

Yvan Beck, a deeply committed Belgian veterinarian who fights for animal protection and welfare, is the author of the book *This is Not a Dolphin*, a passionate plea for the fair treatment of cetaceans, as well as a scathing and unfailing indictment against those who exploit them mercilessly. He provides documentation on how dolphins are mistreated in dolphinariums and shines light on the huge financial interests at stake and the manipulation by powerful multinational business interests who make huge profits from the suffering of cetaceans.

There can be no doubt that cetaceans are highly evolved animals, endowed with self-awareness and great sensitivity. In 2012 a group of eminent cognitive neuroscience researchers published *The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness* (2) in which they declared, “Convergent evidence indicates that non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviours. Consequently, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Non-human animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates.”



Each species possesses “intelligence” and specific skills that it needs to survive and achieve its goals. As evidenced by countless observations, dolphins are noted for their ability to provide the same type of targeted assistance as humans, great apes, and elephants. When a dolphin is ill or injured, the other dolphin “rescuers” no longer feed themselves, but concentrate for weeks on helping the dolphin in trouble. Sometimes dolphins will

adopt young ones who have become orphaned or disabled. In their groups, dolphins are individuals and each has a name. Mothers teach their baby dolphins from an early age to pronounce their whistled signature. As a result, dolphins who are siblings can find one another and recognize each other. The whistled signature also provides information as to the emotional state of that dolphin. A dolphin who is in danger will accelerate the frequency of his signal, which allows others to come to his rescue. It is this very signature that we can hear in the distressed cries of dolphins held in captivity.

The environment that we impose on captive dolphins has nothing to do with their physiological and natural behavioural needs. In the work quoted above, the authors said that obviously dolphinariums do not provide – and are incapable of offering – living conditions that respect the welfare standards, as defined by the European directives, of each animal species they hold in captivity – least of all, meet their basic needs, if only that of space.

In their natural element, a dolphin can swim up to 100 kilometres per day to hunt, play, and develop social relationships with other dolphins. The conditions in which they are



held captive does not allow them to manifest typical behaviours: They are prevented from having not only freedom, but also a wealth of social ties and normal forms of communication. The tank water, often chlorinated, leads to many diseases. Orcas, who are other victims of these aquatic parks, survive only seven years on average in such places. In their natural habitat, females can live about 50 years (and up to 80-90 years) and males, 30 years (and up to 50-60 years).

Even if aquatic parks and dolphinariums are beginning to have a bad reputation in North America and Europe, their numbers are unfortunately increasing considerably in China and other Asian countries.

To end the traffic of these wildlife species, it is important both to oppose the creation of new dolphinariums and to demand that all cetaceans who are used as entertainment objects in aquatic parks be freed. A few countries have banned the confinement of cetaceans, namely, India, Switzerland, Croatia, Cyprus, Hungary, Slovenia, Chile, and Costa Rica. The association One Voice proposes that fishermen who catch cetaceans, especially those from Japan, act as eco-guards or guides to bring eco-tourism enthusiasts out to enjoy one of the most beautiful shows there is: that of dolphins in the wild.

We all support morality, justice, and kind-heartedness. Therefore, each of us can take the path that leads to greater ethical consistency and put an end to the constant games

of cognitive dissonance we play in an attempt to reconcile our moral principles with our behaviour.

It is unjust and morally unacceptable to inflict unnecessary suffering on other sentient beings. More and more of us are no longer satisfied with ethics that are limited to the way in which humans behave with one another and feel that goodwill towards all species, who are fellow citizens on this Earth, is not a mere option we can choose, but an essential aspect of these ethics. It is, therefore, incumbent upon us to continue to promote the development of such impartial justice and compassion towards all sentient beings.

How then do we integrate the respect for justice and morality with our relationship with animals? In *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights*,⁽⁴⁾ Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka suggest that we treat wild animals as sovereign political communities, with their own territories, since the principle of sovereignty seeks to protect peoples against paternalistic interference from or the interests of more powerful groups.

Wild animals are skilled at feeding themselves, getting around, avoiding dangers, managing the risks they take, playing, and raising a family. It is crucial for us to preserve their way of life, protect their territory, respect their will to govern themselves, and avoid activities that harm them directly (hunting, destroying their habitats) or indirectly (pollution, general degradation of the environment due to human activities). These are the types of rights that must be applied also to cetaceans.

There is no point in pretending to make their prison more pleasant in order to draw attention away from the issue and thereby continue to earn money at the cost of the suffering and the freedom of these wildlife animals: the only acceptable dolphinarium is a dolphinarium that is shut down — once and for all.

Notes

(1) Yvan Beck is also the author of the documentary *Love Meat Tender* and President of the non-profit organization *Planète Vie*.

(2) The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness:

<http://fcmconference.org/img/CambridgeDeclarationOnConsciousness.pdf> translated into French by François Tharaud and published in *Les Cahiers Antispécistes* No°35, November 2012 including Philip Low, Jaak Panksepp, Diana Reiss, David Edelman, Bruno Van Swinderen, and Christof Koch, got together at the University of Cambridge for the Francis Crick Memorial Conference on Consciousness in Human and non-Human Animals.

(3) Caldwell, M. C., & Caldwell, D. K. (1966). *Epimeletic (care-giving) behavior in Cetacea. Whales, porpoises and dolphins*. University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 755 - 789.

(4) Donaldson, (S.), & Kymlicka, (W.), *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights*. Oxford University Press, 2011.