

Swimming with captive dolphins: The Facts

The primary arguments against these types of facilities are based on facts, not opinion. Dolphins in captivity face stress and illness; dolphins and members of the public can be injured in these programs; and any new captive facility perpetuates a global trade in dolphins that are still captured from the wild, often using cruel or unsustainable methods. Furthermore, siting a one million gallon captive dolphin program in the Sonoran Desert in the midst of a multi-year drought is not responsible or sustainable.

Swimming with dolphins may seem like fun, but a darker reality is often kept hidden from public view. Many people do not realize that the dolphins in these programs are living a stressful and often



dramatically-shortened life in captivity. Many have been captured from the wild, taken from their family groups, and have endured multiple transports covering long distances. This global trade in dolphins is perpetuated by any new SWTD facility and leaves many wild dolphin populations fractured and at risk, through inhumane collection methods, such as the drive hunts in Japan. For those born in captivity, a deprived and chlorinated environment, aggression from pool mates, forced interactions with the public, and constant medication is the only life they will know.

Life in captivity

- Dolphins may have a lower survival rate than in the wild, and their quality of life is severely compromised by barren and concrete enclosures;
- Individuals are unable to communicate, hunt, roam, mate and play as they would in the wild;
- Stress of confinement often results in behavioral abnormalities;
- Dolphins suffer injury or death from causes unique to captive environments, including viral and bacterial infections, ingestion of foreign objects, and trauma from colliding with hard surfaces or pool mates.

Injury and disease

- Dolphins are large, powerful creatures, even when well trained. Swimmers in these programs have suffered injuries, incurring bites, bruise, and even broken bones. Dolphins are also at risk of injury from swimmers, including from fingernails or careless touching and groping;
- The possibility of bidirectional disease transmission between dolphins and the public is a real concern acknowledged by marine mammal professionals;
- Interaction with swimmers or aggressive pool mates can lead to heightened stress and anxiety, which is often managed through medication and antibiotics. Over time, this can lead to a compromised immune system, resulting in increased susceptibility to illness and disease, such as pneumonia, a common cause of death in captive dolphins.

Capture from the wild

- Dolphins continue to be captured from the wild to supply the growing demand for interactive programs;
- Methods utilized to capture and transport dolphins can be breathtakingly cruel. Many individuals may die during capture or transport operations;
- Dolphins maintain complex social and family groups, and indiscriminate captures may potentially devastate local populations already under threat from other human activities.

High expectations

- Scientific studies have shown that many people describe a feeling of disappointment or regret after participating in these programs. They may walk away with an experience that is far from the natural wildlife encounter they were looking for, or feel conflicted about the confinement of such large and powerful creatures;
- Dolphins are large and powerful creatures, and entering the water with them can be frightening or intimidating for swimmers;
- Many swimmers expect a reciprocal and voluntary interaction, but the dolphins in these programs are highly trained and interact only in a very controlled and often impersonal manner.

What about swimming with dolphins in the wild?

In the United States, harassing and/or feeding dolphins in the wild is illegal and detrimental to dolphin populations. In some locations, dolphins are disturbed by operators that drop swimmers too close or too frequently, and may leave their resting, breeding or feeding areas and even be displaced from their homes. Other risks include the safety of swimmers, injury to dolphins by boats and other watercraft, and the potential for dolphins to become dependent upon humans for food if enticed by hand-outs. There are several 'hot spots' in the United States where human swimmers are disrupting wild populations and even intentionally vandalizing and harming dolphins because of their habituation to human activities or while engaged in close interactions, prompting serious concern and regulatory action from management authorities.

What you can do!

- Donate to ADLA's Dolphin Campaign
- Do not patronize any zoo or aquarium that holds whales or dolphins in captivity
- Book a whale and dolphin watching trip with a responsible tour operator and support local ecotourism. There are many responsible operators in nearby California that encounter whales and dolphins in the wild all year round. Better yet, you can even watch dolphins from the shoreline!
- Educate your friends and families about the realities of captivity. A great place to start is the documentary *A Fall from Freedom*, which you can [download here](#)