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PRESS RELEASE

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THE TRUTH ABOUT THE PINK DOLPHINS AT DOLPHIN LAGOON, SINGAPORE

SINGAPORE 30 OCTOBER – The Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES) is appalled by Haw Par Corporation Limited's (Haw Par) denial of the facts and scientific evidence presented in the 'Suffering, not Smiling' campaign. ACRES further regrets that Haw Par continues to ignore the calls of the public and worldwide organisation to release the dolphins and in addition refuse to meet up with ACRES to find an amicable solution.

The statements in Haw Par's press release on 27 October 2003 were neither factual nor based on current scientific understanding of dolphins. Below are statements made by Haw Par which we are refuting.

1. "The dolphins are definitely not starved. They are fed their full quota of food every day irrespective of whether they perform or not." Haw Par.

Underwater World staff have revealed to ACRES (recorded on video 24 August 2003) that: "The time we feed them is actually during the show. When they do something correct, we feed them. This is called positive reinforcement, a method by us to train the dolphins."

Indeed, Han and Euang, the performing dolphins are fed 6.5 kg of fish during the show, out of the 7.5 kg of fish fed to them for the whole day. They do not perform the circus tricks because they enjoy doing it. Rather, they perform due to the fact that they are hungry and will only get food for doing a trick correctly.

The dolphins do not have an alternative source of food. While Haw Par claims there are fish in the lagoon and that the dolphins have been hunting these fish, on top of the food they provide. Underwater world staff's (recorded on video 24 August 2003), in response to ACRES's query regarding the presence of fish in the lagoon, stated that: "There are some, but usually quite small, so they do a form of play, they catch it for fun."

2. "The dolphins are definitely not suffering" Haw Par.

Recent studies conducted by Oxford University states that "depriving the animals of their naturally large territories was an important factor in predicting how well they would adapt to captivity." The pink dolphins have a home range of 30 - 400 square kilometres in the wild. At Dolphin Lagoon, they are provided with only 0.0003 per cent of this. Providing these far-ranging animals with such a small space is clearly detrimental.

Recent studies in the United States suggest that an inordinate number of captive dolphins are succumbing to typical stress-related illnesses such as heart attacks and gastric ulcers. These stress-related illnesses are associated with animals that are presented with no options during stressful events.

These statements are not far-fetched, with regards to the conditions at Underwater World. Namtam, the female dolphin at Underwater World, had succumbed to a stress related illness. She died of acute gastritis. On March 5, 2001, Namtam went into shock, lost consciousness and died (The Straits Times, 28 March 2001)

3. “The dolphins have low stress levels... regular blood tests of the dolphins are carried out at least once a month and have always been in the acceptable levels.” Haw Par.

As stated by Underwater World, very little studies have been done on this species of dolphins. To our knowledge, no studies have been done on cortisol or other stress-related hormones for this species of dolphins. How then does Haw Par determine what are ‘acceptable levels’?

It should be noted that the level of cortisol in stressed animals are highly variable and differ between individuals. These blood test cannot as such, be used as an indicator of whether or not an animal is stressed.

4. “The successful reproduction of the birth of a dolphin calf in the Dolphin Lagoon in 2002 further demonstrates that the environment at the Dolphin Lagoon is conducive for the dolphins.” Haw Par.

The birth of Splash at Dolphin Lagoon does not indicate that conditions are optimal for the animals. It should be noted that even animals confined in factory farms breed. Breeding occurs in these captive environments where conditions are extremely poor. A successful breeding programme simply cannot be used as an indicator of good welfare.

5. “The education and research programmes at the Dolphin Lagoon have enormous benefit for public education and dolphin conservation.” Haw Par.

Captive dolphins do not exhibit the same behaviour as their wild counterparts because of the totally different living conditions. The complex nature of dolphins’ lives cannot possibly be demonstrated in captivity. The current animal shows at Dolphin Lagoon, featuring the dolphins performing unnatural acts, also contradict earlier statements by Haw Par assuring the public that “the dolphins would not be made to perform tricks which are unnatural.” (The Straits Times, 13 Nov 1999).

What can one learn from seeing a dolphin play football, balancing balls on their rostrum and having people ride on them as water skis? These shows are not educational and only serve to reinforce the notion that man is above nature and controls it, rather than being a part of it.

Research conducted on captive dolphins also has little benefit to the conservation of wild dolphins (Appendix I).

Rehabilitation and release

Haw Par had stated earlier (The Straits Times, 13 Nov 1999) that it will consider releasing the dolphins back into the wild. Any statements now, indicating that releasing dolphins back into the wild is impossible, contradict these earlier statements.

ACRES, along with the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) will also be more than willing to help as consultants in the rehabilitation process. Ric O’Barry from WSPA has already rehabilitated and released 14 dolphins.

8, 399 people and 44 worldwide organisations are calling for an end to the abuse of dolphins in Singapore. As a leading corporation in Singapore, it would be unconscionable of Haw Par to continue to exploit the dolphins.

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Notes for editors: Appendix I (Research on captive dolphins)

Captive versus natural environments

The physical nature of the captive environment will have a profound influence on the quality and relevance of insights, which the research can provide.

Animals confined in pools, even big ones, obviously are not able to carry out all of their normal life patterns. The outward face of dolphins, the ways they deal with their larger world, necessarily exist only as a hint in captive animals.

The bland and static environment of the pool is very different from the complex environment of the oceans. Even basic reproductive data may not be relevant to wild populations because changing environmental conditions and food availability will affect the reproductive potential.

The shortcomings of the captive environment, the unnatural nature of the captive population, the lack of a representative sample and our improving ability to study animals in their natural environment all undermine the case for research on captive dolphins being directly relevant to conservation of wild populations. Ironically it is only by conducting studies on wild animals and making comparative assessments that the value of captive studies be assessed. Inevitably, this again raises the question of whether the studies could not be more appropriately carried out in the wild.

The natural alternative: Field studies in the natural environment

What is not known about other species' longevity and social dynamics is unlikely to be learned under the artificial conditions of confinement. Long-term field studies based on observations and photo-identification techniques have revealed more about a species' natural history, social structure and longevity, than any research conducted on captives.

Admittedly, field research and observational studies are painstakingly slow and expensive. Yet, few can dispute the value and results of these scientific findings. Pioneering work on orca photo-identification by Michael Bigg, on chimpanzees by Jane Goodall, and on mountain gorillas by Dian Fossey, could never have been accomplished in captive settings.

Dr Thomas Jefferson's three year study of wild Indo-Pacific hump-backed dolphins also provided important data (movement patterns, home ranges, social organisation, feeding habits, growth, reproduction and eco-toxicology). These data, which have been vital in developing conservation strategies for the protection of these dolphins, could never have been obtained in a captive environment.

Techniques for use in the wild have become increasingly sophisticated. Visual sonar, radio and satellite tracking are becoming routine allowing much more information to be collected than was possible in the past. Because of the complexities of the natural environment such research may prove more directly relevant to conservation of wild species.

List of research conducted in captive environments and factors that influence it

Blood chemistry

Over the years the justification for the research has expanded from determining baseline levels from which to assess the health of animals in captivity to being able 'to diagnose disease problems in wild populations'.

Normal ranges for haematology and blood biochemistry have been established for the majority of commonly held whales and dolphins. Whilst this data is useful for monitoring the health of captive animals, their relevance to free-living animals is limited because captivity leads to alterations in basic haematology and blood biochemistry.

The physical fact of confinement has profound effects on many aspects of cetacean physiology and ecology. Basic haematology and biochemistry parameters are altered for several reasons including the stress of captivity, routine medication and diet. Shallow pools and restricted areas for travel mean that adaptive changes associated with the physiological requirements of diving and foraging may be lost.

For example, wild bottlenose dolphins have significantly higher white blood cell (WBC) counts, a lower percentage of neutrophils and a higher percentage of eosinophils than captive dolphins.

The artificial diets of captive animals also affect some aspects of their blood chemistry. Levels of blood urea nitrogen (BUN) are related to the protein content of the diet and cholesterol and triglyceride levels are affected by the fat content. BUN levels were lower in captive bottlenose dolphins than in wild dolphins and cholesterol and triglyceride levels higher.

Another difference between wild and captive species has been detected in circulating levels of the thyroid hormones. In free living belugas, there are seasonal variations in thyroxine and triiodothyronine, with levels significantly higher in the summer than in the winter. This seasonal variation is not seen in captive belugas, which is attributed to their relatively constant environment.

In addition, significant individual variation in haematology has been recorded in the beluga, harbour porpoise and orca which has led Bossart and Dierauf (1990) to conclude that: "...individual baselines must be established for each animal in one's care before being confident that any particular value is abnormal."

The relevance and application of haematology and blood chemistry data collected from captive animals to wild animals is clearly questionable.

Breeding

All the research on reproduction using captive animals is clearly relevant to the successful breeding of animals in captivity.

However, the highly controlled environment of the aquarium is a long way from that of the ocean. Feeding has a marked effect on these parameters and the unnatural composition and idealised nature of zoo diets mean that animals may be growing more quickly and reproducing earlier and more frequently than in the natural environment.

Factors likely to influence calving intervals are for example; food availability and whether a suitable mate is present at the correct time. Values that are established in captivity would have to be very carefully verified in the wild if they were to be applied in management regimes. It would be dangerous to apply this information directly to the conservation and management of wild populations as it may overestimate their reproductive capacities.