

## From Oceans to Pens: Dolphin 'Swim' Programs and Dolphin Tourism

by Tony Frohoff

We all know that dolphins and humans have been mutually curious about each other since ancient times. The strength of this interspecies bond is so powerful that some dolphins and humans have even risked their lives to come to the aid of one another. However, this relationship has also been exploited to the point of fragility.

In the past few decades, it has become far more popular to watch dolphins and whales than to kill them in many parts of the world. Although this is certainly cause to celebrate, I do so tentatively, because many dolphin species are facing among the most serious of wildlife conservation challenges today. And the renewed popularity of dolphins has brought with it a surge of intensive, commercial, and widespread exploitation of dolphins internationally. Dolphins in captivity and in the wild are widely sought-after as sources of entertainment, recreation and to a lesser degree, for educational and therapeutic purposes. In the process, dolphins are being captured, harmed, and even killed – just so that people can be close to them.

Research, management, and public awareness of all these types of interactions have lacked miserably behind their expansion – and at the dolphins' expense.

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So, in our enthusiasm to be near dolphins we have overlooked the most important question – *“Do they want to be close to us?”* Because dolphins generally provide such positive experiences for us, we rarely consider how we affect them. And when we do, our vision is often blurred by the glamorous images we’ve grown up with as well as our own personal desires. As a result, we may inadvertently hurt the same animals with whom we seek to interact.

I’d like to literally go ‘beneath the surface’ of these interactions and explore the ways in which they affect the dolphins – with an emphasis on swimming with them in the wild and in captivity.

### **Dolphins in the Wild**

Viewing dolphins in the wild is not a new phenomenon. It can be an amazing experience and, when done in moderation, can occur responsibly. But recently, it’s not uncommon to see boaters and swimmers descending upon wild dolphins in droves in many parts of the world. The formalization and commercialization of programs making dolphins more accessible to the public allows for unprecedented opportunities to watch, feed, touch, and swim with dolphins from boats and from shore. Examples of this can be found all over the world ... from the tropics to the arctic. For example, tens of thousands of people every year, many of them tourists, now attempt to swim with wild dolphins in New Zealand<sup>1</sup>.

In Hawaii, it has become very popular to swim with spinner dolphins. Signs are displayed which describe the laws prohibiting this, but few people follow them. As a result, dolphins who rely on protected bays to rest in, are often disturbed<sup>2</sup>. Other popular areas include the Bahamas, Australia, Costa Rica, and even Japan. Japan is particularly interesting, because here, people may be swimming with dolphins on one side of a bay while others may be killing them on another! However, some fishermen have converted from dolphin killing to dolphin watching. Most recently, Izumi Ishii – formerly a leader of one of the dolphin hunting boats – now leads dolphin-watching trips. As Mr. Ishii stated, “I heard the sound of the dolphins crying as they were killed. I could not bear it”<sup>3</sup>. In this particular circumstance, it’s hard to see how the respective benefits of



dolphin tourism could not outweigh the risks, provided that the boats operate responsibly.

Some of the most interesting examples are found when free-ranging **solitary dolphins** approach people and initiate 'friendly' interactions over long periods of time ... sometimes for years. These animals are rarely, if ever, seen with other dolphins and are often extraordinarily sociable with people. We're not sure why they're alone, but it creates unique dangers for the dolphins. The **feeding** of free-ranging dolphins is also particularly hazardous to them. In the U.S., despite this being illegal, it still occurs and dolphins have suffered greatly in the process. And feeding them in marine parks certainly does not help to educate the public about this problem.

Unfortunately, most people still believe that the dolphins can simply 'swim away' if they don't want to be near them. This is typically because of a lack of knowledge about the importance of select habitats to dolphins as well as the impact that the energetic expenditure of having to swim away from people can have on them.

Regulatory protection from human disturbance ranges widely from nonexistent to stringent around the world. The United States' Marine Mammal Protection Act has among the strictest provisions. However, these laws are rarely enforced and new regulations are in the making that may improve this situation. New Zealand is one of the few places where people aren't merely permitted to swim with wild dolphins, but the government gives permits to commercial operators to do so as part of a rapidly expanding tourism industry.

Two years ago, the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission formally addressed the impact of human swimmers on free-ranging dolphins for the first time. For this meeting, I conducted a review of this subject<sup>4</sup> and this is a summary of what I found:

- First, even the most well-intentioned interactions with dolphins are accompanied by unpredictable impacts and risks to the animals. These may be subtle, cumulative, long-term, and life-threatening to individuals as well as to populations. For example, dolphins can be interrupted from important activities such as feeding, mating, resting, and birthing and are easily injured by boats.

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- The impacts of swimmers, even in the absence of boats, may be serious to dolphins.
- And because of the subtleties of many dolphin behaviors, we should never conclude that we're not disturbing them simply because we can't detect it.

This review made it clear that dolphins exhibiting the highest degree of contact with humans are at the greatest risk of injury, illness, or death from people. **Consequently, it was concluded that a precautionary approach to managing these activities is warranted so that the burden of proof lies with those who want to interact with the dolphins rather than those who want to protect them.**

*Some Examples (accompanying videotape and other narration):*

- Dr. Kathleen Dudzinski and I studied the interactions between spotted dolphins in the Bahamas and human swimmers<sup>5</sup>. We found that over the years, many of the interactions seemed relatively benign, yet some dolphins now engage in physical contact with human swimmers. This places the dolphins at exceptional risk from people who may not be well-intentioned. This also illustrates that some encounters with dolphins can have long-term impacts even though the short-term impacts may appear negligible.
- With Oceanic Society Expeditions researchers<sup>6</sup> I studied a solitary, sociable bottlenose dolphin in Belize. We found that only by managing the behavior of people with whom she swam that her aggression towards people decreased notably.
- Cathy Kinsman and I have been studying several different solitary beluga whales in Eastern Canada who have been initiating interaction with boaters and swimmers (the videotape shows examples of the many problems encountered by these belugas in their contact with people).

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### *Interspecies mis-communication*

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Many of the examples shown on the video illustrate how people frequently either ignore or misinterpret the signals given by dolphins during their interactions with humans. In fact, dolphins may be the most frequently misunderstood of all animals. Our personal expectations and cultural preconceptions about dolphins can easily blind us to their unique needs. For example, I cannot count the number of times in which I've seen people in boats or in the water interpret disturbance-related dolphin behaviors (such as

vigorous ‘fluke-slaps’ right next to the boat) as signs that the dolphins were indicating that they ‘wanted to play’ or that they were ‘happy to see them’.

It is not uncommon for such miscommunication to result in captive and free-ranging dolphins injuring swimmers (including their own trainers). In one instance, a free-ranging bottlenose dolphin in Brazil killed a swimmer (who was drunk and abusing the animal) in apparent self-defense<sup>7</sup>. There have also been two people whose deaths were directly related to being in the water with captive orcas<sup>8</sup>. It is clear to me that many of these situations could have been averted if people had correctly identified and appropriately responded to the dolphins’ expressions of stress or frustration. As a result, my interest in interspecies communication quickly led to a less glamorous specialization in interspecies *mis*-communication.



### Captive Dolphins

The public can also interact with captive dolphins through a variety of ‘swim-with-the-dolphin programs’ and ‘petting/feeding’ programs in facilities around the world. Accurate numbers of facilities are impossible to obtain because many aren’t licensed. However, approximately 200 captive dolphin facilities are *known* to exist, each containing variable numbers of dolphins, in approximately 60 countries. The numbers of dolphins being captured from the wild continues to increase, as swim programs in particular gain in popularity and more people profit from them.

Laws governing the capture and maintenance of captive dolphins vary widely around the world, from being nonexistent to fairly comprehensive. But even among the countries with regulations, most have no special provisions for those used in interactive programs. Even the U.S., which has over 20 captive ‘swim’ and ‘petting’ programs, does not provide any more enforced protection for the dolphins used in these programs than those who don’t interact with the public.

As far as I know, there have only been 2 studies of captive swim programs. My study was the first and was conducted at a facility in the U.S. in 1992<sup>9</sup>. Shortly afterwards, the U.S. government commissioned research<sup>10</sup>

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at four of the U.S. facilities. Both of our studies observed obvious stress-related behaviors in dolphins that were related to potentially long-term negative physiological states. These included submissive and evasive behaviors related to stress and disturbance. And these occurred in the American facilities which are often far better than most.

The **educational benefits** of these interactive programs are highly questionable. I must say that, after years of watching them, they look like little more than glorified petting zoos, using exotic dolphins instead of domestic farm animals! I doubt that people will be any more inspired to work for dolphin protection after participating in these programs than people will become vegetarians after visiting a petting zoo. Second, not only does the public not

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learn much – if anything – about the real life of dolphins, but they go home *miseducated*; thinking that the tricks they saw are really how dolphins behave in the wild and that the dolphins are playthings or toys. Third, these captive programs likely perpetuate the problems facing wild dolphins by miseducating people that it is o.k. to touch and feed these wild animals. In fact, one of the things that seems so ironic is that people are basically encouraged to do the same things to captive dolphins that are considered “harassment” – and illegal in some countries – when done to free-ranging dolphins.<sup>10a</sup>

**Dolphin-assisted therapy** is highly controversial. I do not know of research demonstrating that interaction with dolphins is any more effective than interaction with domestic animals. Perhaps it is only more glamorous and exotic. Given the risks to people and dolphins involved in these encounters, many researchers question the justifiability of dolphin-assisted therapy. I would like to quote Dr. Betsy Smith, a pioneer in this field, as saying, *“People would never throw their child in with a strange dog, but they’ll throw them in with a strange dolphin. What you are looking at are vulnerable people and vulnerable dolphins.”*<sup>11</sup>



Most people also don’t hear about the **injuries** that people get from swimming with captive dolphins as they’re generally not reported. These have included broken bones, internal injuries, and serious wounds. In addition to the 18 or so documented cases in the U.S. within a five year period, I personally witnessed many more injuries than those reported during this time.

Regardless, captive swim programs not only continue, but are expanding at an astonishing rate, especially in Asia and the tropics, largely due to tourism-related rev-

enues. Overall, this demand for captive dolphins does far more than harm the individual captured. It also negatively impacts already depleted populations by removing breeding or otherwise important members of the groups, as well as by harassing other group members during the process of capture.

I'd like to note that it's not only animal rights activists who oppose these captive programs, as the media so often portrays. Many marine mammal biologists, and even some of the world's most well-respected trainers are opposed to them – because of the dangers to humans, as well as the misleading representation of dolphins that they impart.

*Some Examples (accompanying videotape and other narration):*

- The Bahamian government commissioned an assessment of three facilities offering swim programs with captive dolphins. One facility was so dangerous to the dolphins (one dolphin had already drowned there) that all of the inspectors recommended to close it immediately.
- Another facility kept a male dolphin separated from all the others because he exhibited sexual behavior towards swimmers (which is not uncommon). The video footage shows this dolphin exhibiting stereotyped circling – which is a classic stress-related behavior. He did this throughout much of the day and did little else. This same dolphin died several months later; evidently, it was a lonely death.
- Less than two years ago, 8 dolphins were captured for a 'swim-with-the-dolphin' facility in La Paz, Mexico. Video footage taken by Juan Antonio Ramirez in Mexico highlights the transport of one of these dolphins. You can see the dolphin being dropped and laid on the rough ground repeatedly and exhibiting clear signs of suffering. It is not surprising that one of these dolphins died shortly after the capture and the healed wounds on some of the others are still visible.

Next, I'd like to briefly address **captive petting/feeding pools** – somewhat of a predecessor to formalized swim programs. The Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society<sup>12</sup> undertook the first (and only to this date) investigation of these programs at four facilities in the United States. During the main tourist seasons, visitors typically have uninterrupted access to the dolphins in these pools all day – up to 14 continuous hours – during which time the dolphins cannot escape the public's attention. They endure persistent noise, banging against the pool and being teased, poked, and prodded so that they can receive the fish offered to them by visitors. They also show signs of eye and skin irritation, indicative of exposure to high levels of chlorine which may be used to counteract the bacteria that people introduce into the pool. Objects such as glasses, hair combs, french fries, and contaminated fish were offered to the dolphins.

The dangers of swallowing foreign objects are confirmed by numerous examples of dolphin mortalities. Nutritional concerns and extreme signs of stress in these dolphins were also disturbing.

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**Where do we go from here?**

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The question remains – how can we be with dolphins responsibly? This is hard to answer considering that people seem to have an insatiable desire for an exhaustible supply of dolphins. As Dr. Horace Dobbs has pointed out, there aren't enough dolphins in the world for everyone<sup>13</sup>. So far, research offers guidance, but few easy answers. Certainly, we need to go beneath the surface of the commercialized and homogenized images of dolphins propagated by the media and be open to learning what the dolphins may think and feel from *their* perspectives, rather than merely our own. In this way, perhaps we can learn to *protect* dolphins with the same passion and zeal with which we seek to interact with them.<sup>14</sup>