

A dolphin dilemma

Every freediver's dream is to swim with dolphins across an open seascape, tumbling and cavorting in three dimensions. They've recently been proven the most intelligent animals after man (surpassing the chimpanzee), and when you interact with them, and witness the way they study you with their gentle eyes, or their rascally antics during play then you know why. It's difficult not to feel the bond of one conscious soul reaching out to greet another.



swimming with wild Atlantic Spotted dolphins in Bimini, Bahamas

So when a resort in Roatan offered me a chance to freedive with trained dolphins on the open reef my heart jumped. Unlike most wild dolphins, who normally show only occasional interest humans, these were dolphins bred in captivity and accustomed to constructing their play with and around humans. In pairs, they are allowed out of their two-acre lagoon holding pen to swim in the open water, and always return at the end of the day. Even when a hurricane destroyed the entire pen most of the pod returned to await its reconstruction. Of all dolphin facilities in the world I would bet that this one has the happiest flippers. It also conducts a lot of non-invasive research into their behavior and communication.



Most 'dolphin dives' like this one use dolphins kept in semi-captivity

However they are still dolphins that don't live normal dolphin lives, and at the end of the day it was for this reason that I felt compelled to decline.

Most of the dolphins were raised in captivity, and it is mainly the males who are let out, so it's normal that they return to their mates in the pens after excursions. Ultimately these captive dolphins might just be a little agoraphobic, and that is sad in such a free-spirited species. It has been proven possible to research dolphins effectively in the wild, so research itself cannot justify dolphin captivity. Interactions are a blessing to those lucky enough to experience them, but I feel these should happen at the dolphins' convenience, not ours.

There are tours which offer the chance to swim with wild dolphins, and if this is done respectfully then it is a more genuine and magical experience.

Dolphins communicate constantly and a lot of this is through touch. In the same way that we would recoil from the touch of a prickly hedgehog, smooth-skinned dolphins find our spindly and sharp-ended fingers creepy, and are suspicious of the explosive and haphazard movements of our gangly limbs. So in the wild they approach and observe, and if they feel safe then they will spin and turn bit by bit closer.



New Zealand's Hector's Dolphin, currently threatened with extinction

I've been lucky enough to experience this kind of encounter, with Bottlenose dolphins in Utila, Honduras, Atlantic Spotted Dolphins in the Bahamas and even with the threatened Hector's Dolphins of New Zealand (more on this soon).

It is a life-affirming experience, and having been blessed with these encounters I cannot in good conscience endorse any kind of dolphin captivity, even one where the dolphins seem completely happy with the arrangement.

- *William Trubridge*

with dolphins in captivity, there is always a reason why they have to come back, it is important that there are people who care for dolphins, who can not go back in the open sea but to exploit them is not a good thing. I am one of the lucky ones who have been diving with dolphins in the Red Sea and it is the most amazing diving I ever had. Swimming and playing with them on their free will... dolphins are free spirits and have to be free in life.

by *Manga Diver* on 2012-02-29 00:46:35

PLEASE READ THE ARTICLE IN TARANAKI DAILY NEWS, 11/4/12, REGARDING THE MAUI DOLPHIN, THEN HAVE A THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU ARE REALLY DOING, I AM ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO WILL LOSE MY HOME OVER YOUR MEDDLING IN AFFAIRS YOU KNOW LITTLE ABOUT!

by *MAREE KISSICK* on 2012-04-10 15:10:48

Maree, I have been studying the issue for several years now, and am in daily communication with the two leading experts on Hector's dolphins and their populations. I know more than a little about the topic, and a lot more than the poorly-informed article in the Taranaki paper (which ludicrously cites sharks and orcas, predators that have coexisted with the dolphins for hundreds of thousands of years, as causes for the species decline). If you should "lose your home" (which I doubt) that would be unfortunate but with all due respect it is irrelevant in the context of losing a species from the face of the earth forever. I would give up my house, all money and possessions in an instant if I knew it would save a species, and if you loved this planet and its denizens then you would do so too. Gill net and trawl fishing is a wasteful and unethical means of plundering the seas, and the only uncertainty in its future is whether it will be banned before or after it has irreversibly ruined our oceans' ecosystems. So please forgive me if I have little sympathy for those who are no longer able to maintain a living from this practice. NZ is a land of diverse opportunity, and there are many forms of sustainable fishing that I am sure the industry could adapt to.

by *William* on 2012-04-10 15:26:07

This is an excellent article which points out the obvious about gill nets and trawl fishing. The fishing industry needs to be restructured using sustainable practices worldwide that put marine life first. The comment by the gill net fisherman above Maree is irresponsible, scary and selfish. It makes you wonder what goes on at sea when they drag the ocean floor or reel in their nets.

by *Kirsten Massebeau* on 2012-04-10 16:06:11

What a wonderful article! To have such knowledgeable voice speaking for dolphins in captivity, and for those swimming free but still extremely threatened by man's activities, shines a bright light on the dolphins' plight.

by *LindieO* on 2012-04-11 12:23:08

It's hardly affairs people know little about Maree, The world is watching us and our practices with what we do with set/gill netting. Let's be able to hold our heads up and announce we are helping to save a species not extinguish it.

by *ria* on 2012-04-14 23:42:10

Superbly written article! It is important for us all as human beings to do our bit however small to save our oceans and their inhabitants. We as humans think that we are evolving...! but how can evolution be destroying where we once came from, "The Sea".....

by *Gary Hunter* on 2012-11-15 12:54:27