



Captivity FAQ

Are all captive dolphins actually unhappy?

For students who have seen dolphins and whales in captivity (which might be most of them!), this can be upsetting. It is not possible for us to know what a dolphin is thinking or feeling, but the evidence is that they experience physical health issues and also display frustration as a result of captive conditions. Even captive-born dolphins, who have never lived in an ocean, show signs of stress due to the small sizes of their tanks. Biologically they are still built for open ocean swimming, so even without knowing what that is, their bodies still feel that way.

Don't parks actually help save marine animals?

In many circumstances, yes. However, this is not as common as they would want the public to think. Many times a marine park has a rescue team, and they will talk a lot about their conservation and rescue efforts. However, this portion of their work is a VERY small part of their operations (often less than 1% of their budget), and some facilities go years or decades without rescuing a single animal. While they definitely do some good, most of their efforts are spent making profit by exploiting the animals they have in their care. (Some facilities keep the "rescues" and turn them into performers or celebrities, like Winter from *A Dolphin Tale*, which causes them extra stress.)

Isn't teaching dolphins tricks fun for them?

Dolphins are used so frequently in movies and shows precisely because they are so intelligent and trainable, and to some extent, they seem interested in interacting with people. The problem is that one of the reasons the dolphins are so motivated is because they are kept very hungry, so they will be eager to learn and perform. It isn't fun for anyone to lose their freedom or free will. Being forced to perform on command your entire life in order to survive and be fed is demeaning.

Aren't they friends with the other dolphins?

Sometimes. Captive dolphins certainly create bonds and friendships with other dolphins, but it is not guaranteed. It is equally possible that they can form rivalries or show aggression towards other captives. (Think of siblings stuck together on a road trip.) There are many instances where aggression has been documented between tank mates.

Don't the trainers love the dolphins? Why would they make them suffer?

Yes, most trainers truly do love the animals in their care. And often, the dolphins appear to have a genuine relationship with the trainers as well. However, the issue is that the trainers don't display the love that also demonstrates respect for the dolphins. Genuine love would not mean asking a dolphin to live its life in a severely limited environment, deprived of all the natural activities that define a dolphin. And while dolphins do seem to show affection for their trainers, it is difficult to know whether its because they are so reliant on them for food and attention.

Don't we learn a lot by having dolphins and whales in captivity?

Yes, but what we learn scientifically has to be understood accurately. We can learn a good deal about their biology if we study them up close in captivity, but we can also learn about them by performing autopsies on wild animals that pass away. We learn about their behavior but in a somewhat restricted way—because every element of captivity is unnatural, and in many ways can curtail or restrict natural behavior, the information we learn about marine mammal behavior in captivity is skewed.