



# Dolphins in Captivity

## Lesson Plan

---

### Summary

Thank you for using our materials to educate your students! Please find below additional information that can serve as a guide for conducting presentations in your classroom setting. You're welcome to delete any slides you feel inappropriate for your classroom, or revise the information as you see fit. You can download the file to your computer to view or edit.

**Tip:** Think about how you will INSPIRE your students and consider what you want them to take away from today's lesson plan.

### Presentation Slides

#### Slide 1:

This is a good time to introduce the topic and why you are discussing it as a class. Keeping dolphins and whales in tanks has been incredibly common for many years and is a huge tourism industry! Most people don't think to question it until confronted with new information.

\*It is important not to inadvertently shame any kids who have been to a captive marine park. They or their parents are not aware of the issues to be discussed, so think of how their experiences can be used to enhance their appreciation for wildlife and how they can use what they saw to shape their understanding.

\* While we talk about marine mammals here, you can also expand the topic if you choose to all forms of wildlife. It can be a tricky subject, but the takeaway is that captivity is something that deserves evaluation from all angles, including the well-being of the animals. Some facilities do more to engage in conservation or prioritize animal care than others.

**Slide 2:**

A few introductory facts about dolphins. Feel free to add more/less. Dolphins are a unique animal because they possess a level of intelligence close to that of humans, which makes them incredibly charismatic and garners a lot of interest.

**Slide 3:**

Dolphins (and whales) are put in captivity in incredibly high numbers, and are one of the few species used in volume for human entertainment and interaction. It is precisely because of their intelligence that they are subject to exploitation. They are not the obvious threats that larger carnivorous animals are, and appear to be smiling, which has created a strong perception that they are happy to be in captivity. (No one wants to kiss a crocodile for a photo.) However, they are wild animals with the capacity to swim over 50 miles a day (depending on the species), so subjecting them to confinement is problematic just as it would be for any other wild animal.

**Slide 4:**

How do they get dolphins to perform on command? Essentially, through starvation. The term used is “positive reinforcement” which sounds very gentle, but the fact is that all dolphins in captivity learn to perform an action by being hungry enough to have the motivation to learn what behavior it is supposed to do. After they have learned a behavior, they will only perform it on command if they are hungry enough to do so. Most show dolphins are fed only (or primarily) at show times, so they will be eager to perform correctly in exchange for their daily meal.

You can explain positive reinforcement in these terms: A student is told that they must clean up their desk area, and if they do not, they are hit with a stick. This is an example of negative reinforcement. Another student is told to clean up their desk area, and when they do so, they are given a cookie. This is an example of positive reinforcement. The third example is that the student is told to clean their desk, and that is the only time they are given food to eat. Once they are hungry, they will do anything they are told to meet a basic need of survival.

**Slide 5:**

Almost all of the behaviors that are seen in a captive situation are unnatural. In the wild, dolphins do not jump through hoops, toss balls in nets, wave flags, or kiss people. All of these behaviors are learned through training, and done solely to entertain human guests. We don't learn anything about what dolphins do in the wild by visiting these facilities, since they are living in an artificial environment and receiving commands for behaviors.

**Slide 6:**

The problems with captivity are not always obvious. But for a wild ocean-dwelling animal, being put into a small tank is incredibly stressful. They have limited range of movement, so they have pent up energy that leads to frustration. In addition, they may share a tank with other dolphins that they do not get along with, which can lead to aggression and injury. In tanks, the water quality is hard to control, so a lot of dolphins suffer from infections and bacteria. Finally, the tanks are usually bare walls with no features (so it looks better when people see it), but it is an incredibly boring environment for animals that are used to interacting with other animals, fish, and natural ocean features. Their use of sonar is also restricted in tanks.

You can ask your students to imagine a small closet in their house, with nothing in it, and just enough room to take 2 steps and turn around. Now have them imagine they need to share that space with someone they may not like that much. Now they can imagine that the room smells, because there is nowhere for their garbage to go, so it keeps piling up. And then they can imagine that their favorite video games or toys have been taken away. And then they can imagine being blindfolded. How long would they be happy living that way? For captive dolphins, it is their entire life.

**Slide 7:**

This video was taken in Japan and shows a white Risso's dolphin hitting its head against a tank wall, which resulted in an injury. This type of behavior is fairly common for captive marine mammals. Other dolphins will chew on the walls or gates, which can break their teeth, or they attack one another. Some behaviors may not be harmful, but they show that dolphins experience negative behavioral impacts from captivity.

**Slide 8:**

This video was taken in Spain of an orca who had been placed in a small tank and is ramming the fence with its head. You can hear the loud clang of metal. This went on for several minutes at least, which could have resulted in injury.

**Slide 9:**

In addition to self-harming behavior or aggression towards other dolphins, captive dolphins also experience other physical problems as a result of captivity. In the ocean, dolphins will dive quite deep between breaths, so they spend only about 20% of their time at the water's surface. In

captivity, they spend more like 80% of their time at the surface, because the tanks are too shallow. Because of that, captive dolphins can easily become sunburned and the bright light of the sun can cause eye damage.

Further, because they are unable to hunt for fish as they would in the ocean, the dolphins are fed frozen dead fish, which is not as nutritious. Dolphins don't drink water, so all of their hydration comes from their food. Frozen fish does not have as much water as live fish, so captive dolphins are often hydrated with a funnel and tube which is placed down their throats.

Many captive dolphins take regular medication for stomach ulcers, which are likely the result of stress. Some have been known to receive antidepressant medication as well. Those that damage their teeth from chewing on gates are often on antibiotics frequently, which means their body grows immune to medication-- when they get another infection, it cannot be treated with regular antibiotics. Certain captive orcas have their cause of death listed as "treatment-resistant infection".

Finally, we see skin problems from a variety of sources: sunburn, attacks by other dolphins, sores from dirty water, and lesions from being grabbed on the fins by swim with dolphin participants or from being required to push participants with their rostrum (nose).

**Slide 10:**

This image shows raw skin at the rostrum, which is the result of either scraping against the tank wall, or being forced to use its rostrum to push park guests around, or a combination of both.

**Slide 11:**

Most dolphins in captivity are not being used for research or conservation-- they are there to entertain people with a show or a interactive experience. The people in the audience will spend 20-30 minutes taking photos, and then will go home with their family at the end of the day. For the dolphins, they will remain confined for the rest of their lives and will suffer in the ways described above. Is it worth it?

**Slide 12:**

This is an image of Lolita, an orca who was captured in Washington State in 1970. She has lived at the Miami Seaquarium in a small tank for 50 years. Her tank mates are smaller dolphins, who have been known to ram and bully her. Her mother is still alive at over 90 years old.

**Slide 13:**

This is an image of Honey, a dolphin who has been alone in a tank in Japan after the marine park closed. She was receiving minimal care for over a year, with no tank mates and no stimulation. Honey eventually passed away due to inadequate care.

**Slide 14:**

This dolphin is part of a traveling circus in Indonesia, where the dolphins are loaded into the backs of trucks and driven hours over bumpy roads from town to town. Often a temporary tank is made by digging a hole in the ground and lining it with plastic. They are asked to perform dangerous tricks like jumping through a flaming hoop. Many of these dolphins die due to the hazardous and unsafe conditions.

**Slide 15:**

As a contrast, these wild dolphins off the coast of California are able to swim in straight lines, dive deep, and be with their chosen pods. Seeing these wild dolphins in their natural habitat is thrilling, inspiring, and can teach us so much more about cherishing and respecting the environment.

**Slide 16:**

What should you do with this new information? Make a commitment that you will not support captivity! Marine parks only stay open because customers are willing to come and pay. If that stops, they will change their practices. Tell others what you know, so that they can learn more about the issue and decide whether they want to visit these places. If everyone decided that they would stop visiting those businesses, change would happen overnight.

If we want dolphins to remain free in the sea, we also need to make sure that the ocean remains a safe environment for them. Chemical pollution, carbon emissions, plastic waste, and noise pollution are all problems that affect marine mammals, but each of us can take steps to reduce these human-created problems! Ask parents for a reusable water bottle instead of plastic water bottles, carpool, and learn about recycling in your town.

*Thank you for your great work educating our kids; they're the future!*