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The Future of Captive Dolphins: From Dolphinariums to Seaside Sanctuaries

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In this essay, I argue that dolphinariums and zoos bear a heavy responsibility for the future of captive dolphins. Not only are they accountable for a history of suffering caused by capturing dolphins and keeping them in small concrete chlorinated tanks, but also for their lack of support to realistic, spacious, seaside sanctuaries. Even though the atmosphere is one of polemics and disinformation, dialogue between all parties involved is the only way forward. This is an expanded version of an essay that I submitted to Belgian media and NGOs.



Captive dolphins near Nantes, France
(Jo-Anne McArthur / One Voice / We Animals)

The keeping of dolphins in Belgium has taken a new turn as Pairi Daiza Zoo announces plans to construct a dolphin enclosure. Following Antwerp Zoo and Boudewijn Seapark, a third project is now taking shape—this time framed as a welfare measure. The zoo argues that the facility would serve as a sanctuary for dolphins that, allegedly, have no other place to go.

Solidarity amongst Zoos

Of all animals ever kept in captivity, dolphins are among the most troubling. Behind the dolphin's trademark 'smile' lies a long record of failed breeding attempts, premature

deaths, and other persistent welfare concerns.¹ Around 2000, I shared the manuscript for my zoo book *The Welfare Ark* with the management of Antwerp Zoo. I demonstrated years of profound welfare issues affecting the dolphins in their care.² Two weeks later, Antwerp Zoo announced publicly that they would stop keeping dolphins, despite having no alternative facility lined up. One option, however, was immediately ruled out: a seaside sanctuary. Maintaining solidarity within the zoo community was deemed more important than exploring this possibility.

A Disastrous Breeding Experiment

In 2024, I testified in the Flemish Parliament about the keeping of dolphins at Boudewijn Seapark, near Bruges. Dr Isabella Clegg, who works as a scientific consultant for dolphinariums, argued that dolphin breeding in Bruges should resume. However, her report made no mention of the dolphins' breeding history. When it was my turn to speak, members of parliament were visibly taken aback by the evidence I presented: years of failed breeding attempts and an extensive list of deaths. Once again, I had discovered, what I could only describe as a disastrous breeding experiment.³

A DISASTROUS BREEDING EXPERIMENT

Oshin (1987-1988)	Kim's calf (1989†)	Terry's calf (1989†)	Fernanda (1990-1992)	Skippy (1990-2000)	Thea (1991†)
Stefanie (1993†)	Astrid (1994†)	Yasmine (1994†)	Simo (1995†)	Guarna (1995†)	Linda's Calf (1996†)
Nemo (1996†)	Linda's calf (1997†)	Yotta (1998-...)	Elo (1998-2012)	Milo (1999-2008)	Iggy (2002†)
Indy (2003-...)	Yotta's calf (2010†)	Roxanne Twin 1 (2011†)	Roxanne Twin 2 (2011†)	Bruce (2012†)	Origi (2014†)
	Moana (2015-...)	Ori (2015-2023)			

† = died same year when born; red = died; yellow = still alive

Source: <https://www.cetabase.org/inventory/boudewijn-seapark/>

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The slide that shocked Members of the Flemish Parliament on breeding at Boudewijn Seapark (Koen Margodt)

The director of Boudewijn Seapark accused me of never having visited his dolphinarium. Yet when I attempted to do exactly that shortly afterward—accompanied by marine biologist and cetacean specialist Dr Ingrid Visser—we were turned away by an enraged director. The reaction raised an obvious question: what was there to hide? Half an hour later, Dr Visser was contacted about our attempt to visit Boudewijn Seapark by a dolphinarium in Greece, that opposes the dolphin sanctuary project in Lipsi. For a moment, I had a déjà vu feeling about what was happening behind the scenes.

Now that Pairi Daiza Zoo wants to keep dolphins, it has once again begun criticising the very idea of seaside sanctuaries. The stance is striking. Zoos that eagerly present

¹ *The Case Against Marine Mammals in Captivity* (Rose, Soller & Parsons, 2023), published by the *Animal Welfare Institute* and *World Animal Protection*; available [here](#).

² In *The Welfare Ark: Suggestions for a Renewed Policy in Zoos* (2000) I argue to turn zoos into sanctuaries, places that put the interests of the individual animals in their care first and available for free [here](#).

³ My full presentation and a video by Dr Jane Goodall can be found [here](#).

themselves as champions of conservation and reintroduction, in this case, are determined to block even a semi-wild sanctuary for dolphins. The contradiction could not be more apparent. We thus arrived at a situation where zoos, after decades of justifying their own existence as champions of reintroducing animals in the wild, present the moving of dolphins to semi-wild conditions as unrealistic, naïve, and dangerous.

Dolphin Sanctuaries – no Shows, no Breeding, and no Tanks of Concrete

Sure, Pairi Daiza Zoo is under fire from the influential Belgian animal advocacy organization GAIA (Global Action in the Interest of Animals). The zoo has a point that more dolphinariums are closing, leaving dolphins who may still live for decades in need of solutions. But the answer cannot be to build yet another expensive concrete tank to accommodate only a handful of them. First, breeding must stop. (Pairi Daiza remains conspicuously silent on this topic.) Second, we need to bring the remaining dolphins to the best viable alternative locations for each of them. Only by following these steps can we move toward genuine, long-term solutions with better welfare outcomes for the dolphins, rather than repeating the mistakes of the past.

Pairi Daiza Zoo is spreading misinformation by suggesting that the dolphins would be released into the wild (where they would indeed be unable to survive). This portrayal is simply inaccurate. The Lipsi project proposes to close off a remote, sheltered bay and equip it with the full range of facilities required for long-term care—veterinary support, controlled feeding, and protected space that allows dolphins to live in a far more natural environment, without being abandoned to the open sea.⁴



The Aegean Marine Life Sanctuary on the island of Lipsi, Greece.
For years, obscure legal complications have prevented this sanctuary
to welcome former captive dolphins
(Archipelagos Institute of Marine Conservation)

The refusal of major zoos to support such an initiative is telling. Instead of engaging with a welfare-driven alternative, they choose to align themselves with institutions such as Loro Parque, where orcas are kept in captivity. This pattern of solidarity reveals where

⁴ For detailed information, see [Aegean Marine Life Sanctuary - Archipelagos](#).

their priorities lie: preserving the traditional dolphinarium model rather than exploring solutions that genuinely improve the lives of the animals they claim to protect.⁵

World renowned marine scientist Dr. Naomi Rose calls Pairei Daiza's claims problematic. Before dolphins are moved to semi-natural enclosures, seawater must be tested for pathogens and the dolphins' immune system must be checked (personal communication, 5 March 2026). These are standard, well-established procedures—not obstacles that invalidate the concept of a seaside sanctuary.

Breed to Kill at European Zoos

Recently, people linked to EAZA (European Association of Zoos and Aquaria) zoos have started promoting the breeding and killing of young and healthy animals from all kinds of species, including great apes and dolphins. I have demonstrated that the background of this is the increased levels of inbreeding due to small zoo populations. In other words, zoos keep too many species compared to the space they have. Rather than EAZA zoos deciding to keep fewer species, they prefer increasing breeding and killing those animals considered no longer needed. Ironically, a wave of animal births may attract more visitors than those turning their backs to zoos.⁶

Dolphins should never ever have been kept in captivity. There is no justification for doing so from a conservation, scientific, educational, or animal welfare perspective. Dolphins are intelligent, complex marine mammals, who, in their natural habitat may travel for hundreds of kilometres in social pods. We must do everything possible to provide them with a more enriching and natural living environment.



The home range of coastal bottlenose dolphins can span hundreds of kilometres (Roger Foster)

Ridiculing the late Dr Jane Goodall

The late Dr Jane Goodall demonstrated how semi-wild sanctuaries can succeed for chimpanzees. She was always convinced that this was also possible—and necessary—

⁵ Loro Parque hosted in 2022 the annual conference of the WAZA (*World Association of Zoos and Aquaria*), thus symbolically and smartly putting their dolphinarium at the center of the zoo community. Severe concerns exist about the keeping of orcas in captivity (Rose, Soller & Parsons, 2023).

⁶ See [Koen Margodt - The Truth about Killing at Zoos](https://www.koenmargodt.com).

for dolphins (watch her [testimony](#)). This is why she asked me to work with Melody Horrill to assemble a committee of experts (including Dr Rose and Dr Visser). For years, the concept of semi-wild sanctuaries for dolphins has been undermined by dolphinariums and zoos — institutions that seem to fear what genuine welfare-based alternatives might mean for their own future. The persistence of this resistance is deeply concerning, not least because it continues to delay solutions that could meaningfully improve the lives of the dolphins still in captivity.

Dr Jane Goodall’s reflections on the plight of captive dolphins have not been warmly received by certain figures within the dolphin industry. Days after her passing away, in October 2025, Dr Jason Bruck ridiculed her on social media, posting about scholar-advocates who “call themselves super-scientists because they are willing to misrepresent others in their pubs.” He added a picture, which he claimed to be the only one he could find of Dr Goodall with a cetacean, where she posed beside a human dressed as a dolphin. For what reason did he make such comments on someone who had just passed away and was mourned by millions of people? Dr Bruck is affiliated with the Stephen F. Austin State University. Not only is he dependent upon captive dolphin facilities for his research work, but his studies are also partially financed by Dolphin Quest, a million-dollar dolphinarium business that sells swim with dolphin programs in Bermuda and Hawaii. (After criticism by Dr Denise Herzing and myself, he either removed his post or limited its visibility on socials.)⁷



Tourists pay hundreds of dollars to swim with dolphins,
like in this hotel in Hawaii
(Jo-Anne McArthur / We Animals)

Zoos should give Something Back

Things should not be like this. Collaboration among people who work with dolphins to improve their welfare and husbandry would make perfect sense. It ought to be the norm, not the exception. Imagine what could be achieved if Pairi Daiza Zoo and Boudewijn Seapark directed their resources toward creating a genuine alternative for dolphins. An

⁷ Over the years, I’ve had strong disagreements with hunters on killing animals. However, a few years ago I visited one of them when he was seriously ill – we always respected each other *as individuals*, notwithstanding our disagreements. Read my essay on [Science, Ethics and Truth](#).

alternative that does more than ban circus-style shows. One that finally ends breeding. One that places the long-term phasing out of dolphin captivity at its centre and offers these magnificent, intelligent mammals a new future in semi-freedom. Retirement in natural sea-side sanctuaries, surrounded by caretakers and veterinarians. Professional plans and financial resources exist.

Better Welfare at Open Sea Pens

We know that dolphins in open sea pens, allowing access to a natural marine environment where ocean water and small fish can pass through netting, show more active and socially engaged behaviour than those confined to concrete tanks. Moreover, dolphins in open sea pens have lower salivary cortisol concentrations than dolphins kept in tanks (suggesting lower stress levels). This difference is not subtle. It reflects the profound impact that a dynamic marine environment has on their physical and psychological wellbeing. However, the captive industry seems to opt for denial.⁸

Why do legal permissions for seaside sanctuaries like Lipsi remain absent without any transparent explanation? Why is false information about Lipsi and other sanctuary projects being circulated, despite support from independent scientists, animal organizations, the wider public, and even dolphinariums such as the Baltimore National Aquarium?

A Greedy Industry

It looks like a million-dollar industry is fighting against the tide for its own survival. I have seen this pattern before: organizations close ranks to avoid opening the door to deeper scrutiny, for example during the debate on invasive animal experimentation. Zoos may very well fear the risk of a slippery slope. Challenges of keeping orcas and bottlenose dolphins may spread to public campaigns against the keeping of other animals. Indeed, this is already happening with questions raised about keeping elephants and great apes in zoos.

Zoos bear a long and heavy historical responsibility—not only for the immense suffering caused by capturing dolphins and keeping them in small concrete chlorinated tanks, but also for their reluctance to support realistic, spacious, seaside sanctuaries.

Zoos and Animal Advocates should Collaborate

After decades in which dolphins have paid the price for human entertainment and commercial gain, it is only reasonable to expect these institutions to return a portion of

⁸ See Ugaz, C., Sánchez, A., Galindo Maldonado, F. (2009) Social and individual behavior of a group of bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) in open and closed facilities. *Veterinaria México*, Number 4, p. 381-387,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286949225_Social_and_individual_behavior_of_a_group_of_bottlenose_dolphins_Tursiops_truncatus_in_open_and_closed_facilities and Ugaz, C., Valdez, R.A., Romano, M.C. and Galindo, F. (2013) Behavior and salivary cortisol of captive dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) kept in open and closed facilities. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, Volume 8, p. 285-290, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jveb.2012.10.006>.

their substantial profits to the dolphins themselves. Retiring them to professional, natural, and expansive seaside sanctuaries is the least they owe them. It has been done for great apes and other complex animals. It could be equally successful for dolphins. However, for this to happen takes courage and collaboration. If only decisionmakers, zoos, dolphinariums, and animal advocates all would collaborate to do the absolute best for dolphins. The first step should be dialogue – it will not be self-evident, but I do not see an alternative way.

Dr. Koen Margodt is an ethicist and guest professor at the universities of Ghent (UGent) and Brussels (VUB) in Belgium. He has performed extensive research towards the ethics of keeping animals in zoos. He was the first to argue that zoos should be converted into sanctuaries. He is co-chair of the Jane Goodall Institute's Global Ethics Committee, with Dr. Marc Bekoff, and the Jane Goodall Institute's Cetacean Committee, with Melody Horrill, which aims to stop keeping dolphins and other cetaceans in captive tanks and move these to enclosed seaside sanctuaries. Website www.koenmargodt.com. See in particular, for his work around dolphins, [Koen Margodt - A Dolphin Plea in the Flemish Parliament](#).