

**AMERICA TONIGHT**  
MON-FRI 9:30PM ET/6:30PM PT



# Baltimore's aquarium: The latest battleground in the dolphin debate

The National Aquarium in Baltimore is the first aquarium or zoo to publicly consider closing its dolphin exhibit

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by **Adam May** - @adammaytv & **Surya Greer**

When John Racanelli arrived as CEO in 2011, the Baltimore's National Aquarium was at a low point. The deaths of **two dolphin calves**, one from pneumonia and the other from internal bleeding, had created, in his words, "an incredibly depressed organization."

And it brought Racanelli to a controversial revelation, one that the head of a zoo or aquarium has never reportedly, publicly said before: "Having calves in this setting may not be the best possible thing for their well-being and health in the long run."

For decades, bottlenose dolphins have entertained crowds across the country. The National Aquarium's dolphin shows alone drew more than 1 million visitors a year. But after the calves' passing, the aquarium shuttered the spectacle. Recent films "Blackfish" and "The Cove" have shifted public attitudes about captive sea mammals, and Racanelli is now making waves in the zoo industry by suggesting they close their dolphin exhibit entirely.

"We're asking some tough questions, we really are," he said. "...I feel we've really only scratched the surface."

### To free or not to free?

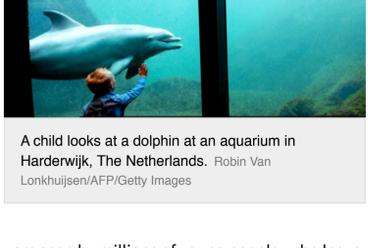
Critics of captive dolphins are armed with a **growing body of science**, which shows that dolphins are more intelligent, emotionally sensitive and self-aware than previously thought. Brent Whitaker, the aquarium's biological director, saw that firsthand after one of the calves died, and its mother, Maya, went into a period of grieving.

"When [dolphins] lose calves, they'll tend to stay connected with that calf, they'll push it around the pool," Whitaker said. "They want it to be alive."

At the National Aquarium, tourists can still see trainers work with the dolphins, just without all the music and production. But even that may soon close up shop.

Freeing the dolphins isn't as easy though as dropping them into the Atlantic. Seven of the eight dolphins at the aquarium in Baltimore were born in captivity, so they've never swum at sea.

Racanelli said that the aquarium is examining everything that could potentially harm the animals if they were released into open ocean, such as pathogens, oil spills, micro-plastics and boat strikes. He thinks the answer could be a "national dolphin sanctuary," or transferring them to the Florida coast – Sarasota Bay, Tampa Bay or the Keys – where the bottlenose dolphins are native and could thrive.



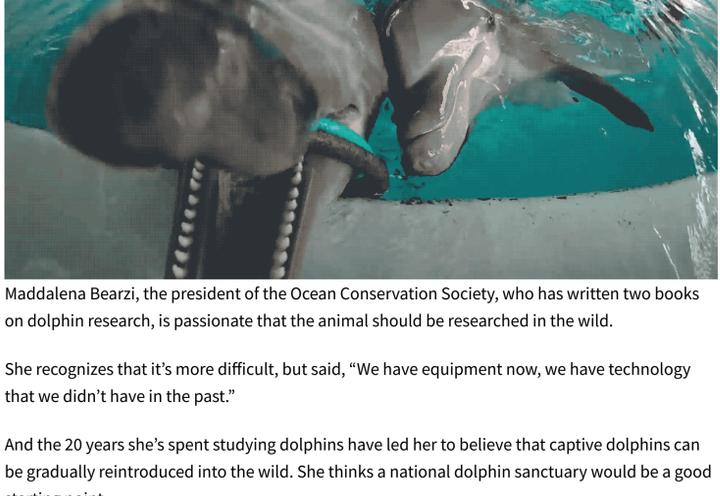
A child looks at a dolphin at an aquarium in Harderwijk, The Netherlands. Robin Van Lonkhuijsen/AFP/Getty Images

A common counter is that dolphins, as a species, are better off when a few are in settings like the Baltimore aquarium. There, they are seen by millions of young people, who leave caring about the animals and more environmentally conscious.

But even Rancanelli doesn't buy that argument. "In many cases, when people see dolphins in this kind of sterile setting, the messages that they take away with them are not in fact the ones that we as conservationists want them too," he said.

Fundamentally, that happy image of the dolphin in a scrubbed up pool doing tricks for fish doesn't always reflect what dolphins are like or what they need in their natural habitat.

### A tipping point



Maddalena Bearzi, the president of the Ocean Conservation Society, who has written two books on dolphin research, is passionate that the animal should be researched in the wild.

She recognizes that it's more difficult, but said, "We have equipment now, we have technology that we didn't have in the past."

And the 20 years she's spent studying dolphins have led her to believe that captive dolphins can be gradually reintroduced into the wild. She thinks a national dolphin sanctuary would be a good starting point.

"One of the challenges will be to find money. But I think the support now, it's coming from the public," Bearzi said. "This has never happened before."

What happens in Baltimore might have a domino effect on how exhibits nationwide handle their dolphins moving forward, although Rancanelli insists he isn't trying to set an example.

Sea World, the most frequent target of criticism by animal rights groups, is also just starting to ask questions about the future of captive sea animals. Sea World did not respond to America Tonight's repeated requests to talk about the measures being debated at Baltimore's National Aquarium.

Ironically, it's what biologists have learned studying dolphins in aquariums that have begun to convince them that aquariums may be an inappropriate home for them.

"The truth is that dolphins are far more cognizant...have much higher level of cognitive capacity, and have very highly demonstrated social behaviors," Racanelli said. "They can obviously sense future events and correlate future and past events. The more we learn here at the aquarium, the more we realize how different these dolphins are from most of their other cousins in the ocean."

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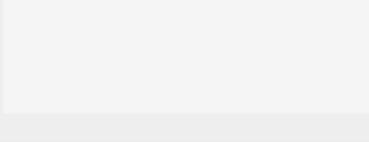
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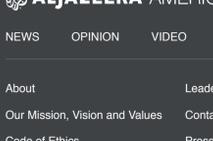


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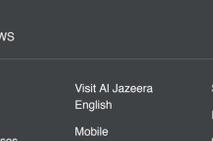
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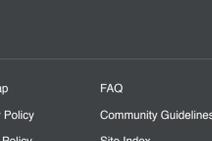
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