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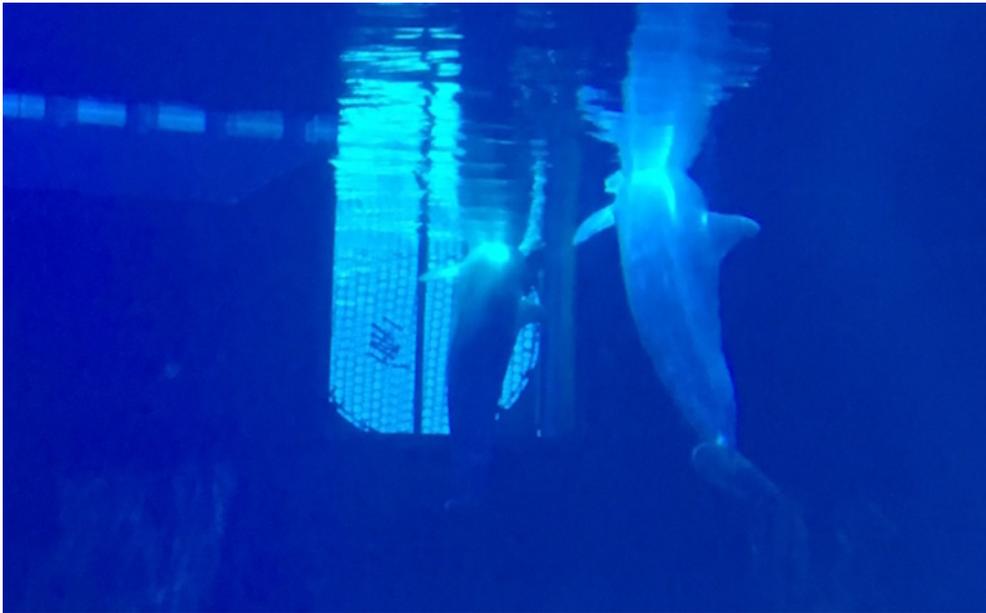
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# Why Is Disney Performing Research on Captive Dolphins?



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By: [Natalia Lima](#) | April 2, 2016  
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Ever since I can remember, Disney World has been a special place for me – my happy place. In the 25 years I've been going there, every visit was always full of magic, fun rides and ice cream – except for one last month.

My day at Disney's Epcot in Orlando, Fla., took an unexpected turn as I stumbled upon "The Seas," an aquarium featuring hundreds of marine creatures. Among the myriad of fish, sting rays and sea turtles, two creatures in particular caught my attention.

Two dolphins were restricted to a minuscule part of the tank. They seemed uneasy and kept gravitating towards a small window opening that appeared to lead to another tank hidden from the public. The window had a roped net that impeded the dolphins from passing through. The dolphins tugged at the net and after a while just floated, staring at the other side.

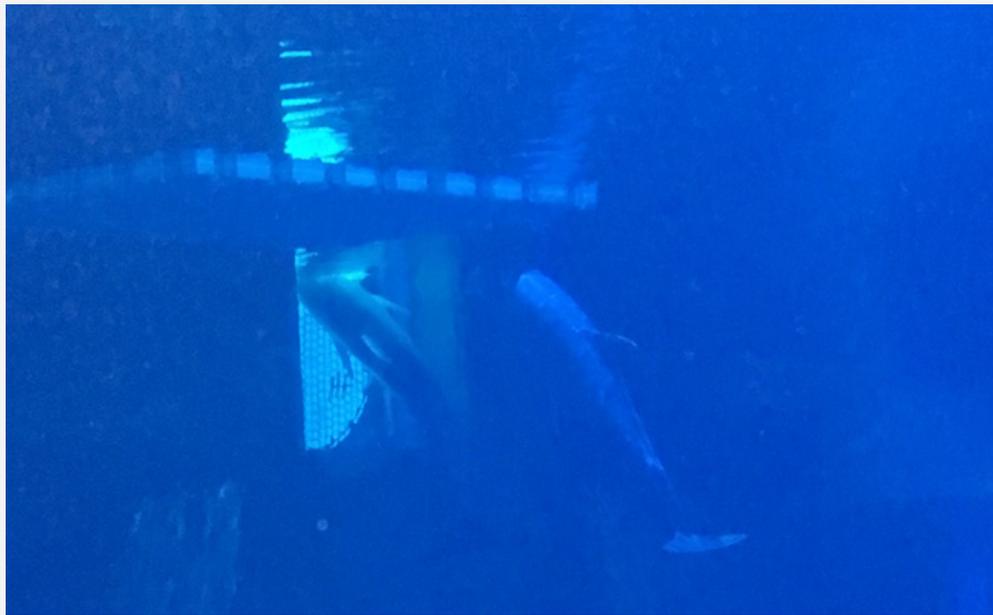
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Captive dolphins at Disney's The Seas. Photo Credit: Natalia Lima

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It may sound silly, but I felt betrayed. How could my beloved Disney do that? And how could this have flown under my radar? I avidly boycotted SeaWorld and have dedicated my entire life to protecting animals.

So, with the skills of a journalist and the passion of a scorned lover, I took to investigating.

When I called customer service to complain, I spoke to a representative who explained that the dolphins are used for [research](#). One of them was taken from the [U.S. Navy Marine Mammal Program](#), but he couldn't disclose the original facilities of the remaining dolphins. The representative assured me that Disney hasn't collected dolphins from the wild in 25 years.

Indeed, [the U.S. Navy](#) has been using dolphins for research and work since 1960. The animals were used in Vietnam and during the Cold War because of their exemplary ability to locate sea mines. They're the underwater equivalent of bomb sniffing dogs, if you will.

Today, the Navy still has [85 dolphins in training](#) at its San Diego base, although most will be phased out by 2017 – to be replaced by drones. The dolphins will be retired like others before them.

But for that dolphin who ended up at Disney, retirement still meant serving humans – this time as a research subject.

The dolphins at Disney are used for cognitive research. From the outside of the tank, trainers place shapes against the glass and observe the length of time required for the dolphins understand them. The experiments are conducted in front of guests.



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[According to one blogger](#), "During the presentation, one trainer will hold a shape card to the tank's glass and a dolphin will swim over to take a look. Then, the dolphin receives a signal to move to the next window and choose between two shapes to find a match. If he succeeds, he gets whistle and hand signals from the trainer and applause from the audience before heading to the surface for a food reward from another trainer. Guests usually find it amusing when the dolphin blows bubbles, pleased with himself for choosing the correct answer."

Applause, rewards for doing something the audience likes... This sounds very familiar.

But at least the work helps dolphin conservation, right?

According to Maddalena Bearzi, President and Co-founder of the [Ocean Conservation Society](#), not so much.

"Generally speaking, because of the artificial settings, research in captivity provides little knowledge that can be applied to the protection and management of these species at sea," she wrote in an opinion piece for [National Geographic](#). "In fact, this kind of research can even be misleading. Many published studies on captive animals focus on training techniques and improvement of husbandry practices, which have no relevance to dolphins living in the wild."

Numerous other scientists have also noted how [animals in captivity](#) don't act as they would in the wild. Such studies risk increasing the margin of error for research.

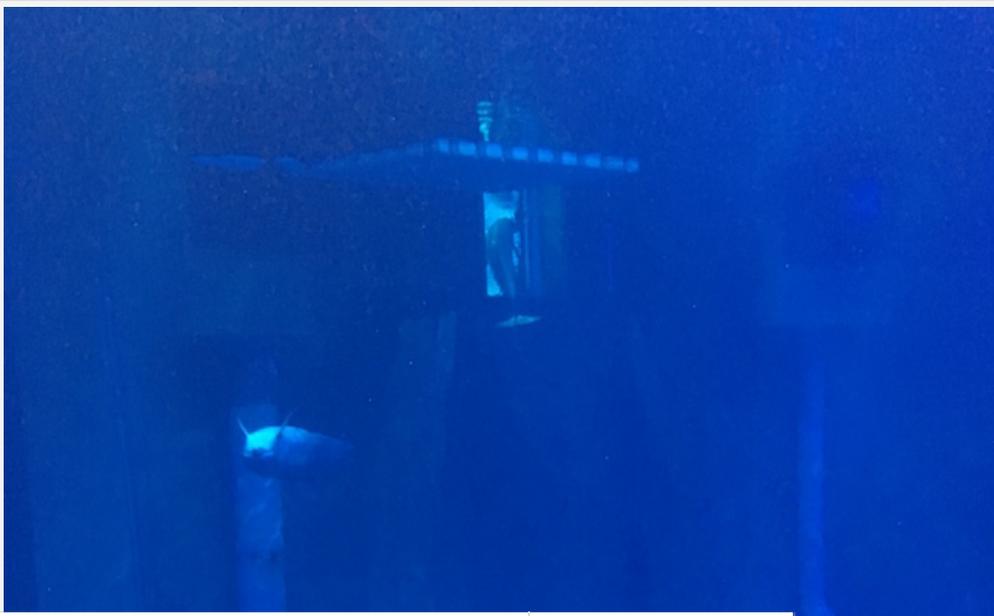
Disney's The Seas is the second largest aquarium in the world. Even so, it can't compare to the ocean, according to Kate Dylewsky, Program Associate for [Born Free USA](#). Dolphins can travel at a speed of eight miles per hour and stay awake 16 hours of day — that's a possible 128 miles of swimming.

"It's a significant distance and it cannot be replicated in a tank," she explains.

And that's especially true when that tank is actually just a tiny portion of the aquarium.

When I asked one of the trainers at The Seas why the two dolphins were confined to such a small space, he explained that they had been "roughhousing" lately. They once had access to the whole space, but now the pair had to be isolated for the other animals' safety.

They also had to be separated from the other two dolphins in their pod, who were now living in the back tank. That, the trainer said, was the reason they kept looking through the window. The dolphins just wanted to know what the others were up to.



Captive Dolphins?



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As it turns out, roughhousing has been a problem for dolphins at Disney before. In 1990, a male dolphin named Bob "roughoused" Katie, a female dolphin, [leading to her death at The Seas](#) — the fourth dolphin death since the animals were first introduced to the place in 1985.

According to The Orlando Sentinel, Bob likely contributed to another two of those four deaths.

So was Bob the problem, or is it captivity?

"Well, 'rough housing' is not exactly a term of art for behavior in dolphins, but yes, dolphins can be aggressive towards each other in captivity and in the wild," said Mark J. Palmer, Associate Director for the [International Marine Mammal Project](#). "But remember, dolphins in the wild can choose where they go and whom they associate with. Furthermore, most dolphin groups consist of families that live together from birth to death, as far as we can see. In captivity, the dolphins are all strangers, plus the confined spaces mean more boredom and stress, and so more aggression, without the ability to swim away."

Separating the dolphins, then, adds Palmer, while defusing the situation immediately, does little to permanently solve aggression.

"Confining animals to different tanks does not necessarily reduce the boredom and stress that is at the root of the aggressiveness," he explains. "And if the dolphins are still in communication (e.g. separated by a gate or otherwise able to hear each other), the stress from the aggressiveness could still be active."

For what it's worth, the dolphins do get to leave that main tank – to interact with people. While not publicized, Disney offers [an interaction program](#) to those who dig deep enough on its website. Up to eight people can get in the tank with the animals for a fee that goes towards "educational purposes."

"There's absolutely no evidence that people seeing a dolphin up close or getting in a pool with them improves the chances of them helping in dolphin conservation or becoming more compassionate towards dolphins or other animals," counters Dylewsky. "People are seeing them in an unnatural environment so it's not educational at all. It looks like it's a mutually beneficial experience, but it's not. In the wild dolphins would not approach people and interact with them."

The irony of the situation is that it all takes place right next to the "Finding Nemo" ride. The building is even called [The Seas with Nemo and Friends Pavilion](#), yet "Finding Dory" – the upcoming sequel – is said to contain a [conservation and anti-captivity message](#), like many other [Disney movies](#) before it.

When I spoke to customer service, I was told the future of The Seas remains up in the air. There are no plans for expansion, and they take customer input very seriously.

I'm not the only one who has urged them to discontinue this program. And I hope I'm not the last one either.

Maybe then Disney will release its dolphins or convert The Seas into a rehabilitation facility like [The Clearwater Aquarium](#).

As it is, there's nothing magical, fun or beautiful about dolphins in captivity.

*Photo Credit: Natalia Lima*

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**Marianne R.** 22 minutes ago

Sad.

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**Susie Reynolds** 28 minutes ago

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**KAREN SickAgain G.** 30 minutes ago

Thank you for sharing.....Disney sucks!!!!!!

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**Randy Q.** about an hour ago

Leave the dolphins alone.

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New research suggests that dolphins are second only to humans in smarts.

- MRI scans indicate that these marine mammals are self-aware
- Researchers think dolphins are especially vulnerable to suffering and trauma.

When human measures for intelligence are applied to other species, dolphins come in

just behind humans in brainpower, according to new research. Dolphins demonstrate skills and awareness previously thought to be present only in humans.

SEND ★



**Muff-Anne York-Haley** *about an hour ago*



Could Natalia Lima or somebody please start a petition on this! So sad, these creatures are sentient beings and they don't deserve this horrible lifestyle! Start a petition, please!

SEND ★



**Anne Moran** *about an hour ago*



Bet good ol' Walt would be turning in his grave, if he knew what was going on at his beloved Disney...

SEND ★



**Cindi Scholefield** *about an hour ago*



So it looks like we have to start boycotting Disney now as well as Seaworld. Sad. I too feel betrayed.

SEND ★



**Pablo B.** *1 hours ago*



tyfs

SEND ★



**Barbara S.** *1 hours ago*



I was wondering about this the other day: Aren't the whales who have been living and working together for years now become a "Pod?" And if so, if we could teach them to hunt for their own food, wouldn't this "Pod" work together just as "Pods" in the wild do? And if these assumptions are correct, wouldn't they have a better chance of surviving in the Wild than Keiko did, years back? I know these large aquariums want what's best for the remaining whales in captivity, but if they keep them all until death, what happens when there is only one left living? Wouldn't that whale be so lonely and so forlorn living (perhaps for years) without another whale friend, life wouldn't seem worth living anymore? Surely these places could create an ocean living space separated from the great oceans, where they can learn to forage for themselves as a pod, and then finally be allowed to be set free - together - as a pod. Perhaps I'm wrong. Your thoughts?

SEND ★



**JO K** *1 hours ago*



Here we go again. Now we have Disney to fight off, we are still fighting SeaWorld. All the greedy CEO's can't wait to set up a new avenue, since SeaWorld is sinking fast.

When will man learn to keep his greedy hands off the oceans and when will the public stop demanding this kind of "family entertainment".

SEND ★

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