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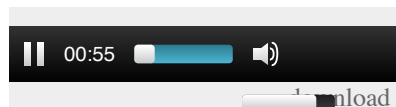
Dolphins In The Desert: Process Of Bringing Dolphins To Arizona Complicated, Controversial

By [Lauren Loftus](#)

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In a brown swath of desert just off the Via de Ventura exit on Loop 101 near north Scottsdale, you can expect to hear the cackle of desert birds, the buzz of insects, maybe even the howl of a coyote over the rumble of passing cars.

But what about dolphin calls?

It's a distinct possibility come late summer.



(Photo courtesy of Dolphinaris)

An architectural rendering of the planned dolphin exhibit and encounter being built near the OdySea aquarium.



(Photo courtesy of Dolphinaris)

Dolphinaris will include areas for visitors to see and watch the dolphins as well as a special encounter pool in which they can swim with the animals.



(Photo by Katherine Fritke - KJZZ)

Dolphinaris is being built next to the OdySea Aquarium, in the same lot of land as Butterfly Wonderland on the reservation.

Concrete is already being poured at the future site of "Dolphinaris" — billed as a “dolphinarium” that will house eight to 12 dolphins born in captivity. It will allow visitors to see, touch and even swim with the animals. Some are furious about the new residents, saying cetaceans — which include marine mammals like dolphins and whales that spend all their time in the water — are definitely not one of [Arizona’s 5 Cs](#) and don’t belong here. But officials with [Dolphinaris](#) say this is a great opportunity for residents and tourists and insist their animals will thrive.

The Pros And Cons Of Captivity

Dolphinaris general manager Dr. Grey Stafford said there are a lot of false narratives about the toll such human interaction takes on dolphins.

“You have animals typically living longer in zoos and aquariums than they do in the wild and you also have animals nowadays that are trained to participate in their own care — through voluntary blood draws, through daily weighings, through all sorts of cooperative behaviors through positive reinforcement,” he said.

Stafford has spent 25 years working in zoos and aquariums, most recently at Wildlife World Zoo in the West Valley. He points to a [2014 Associated Press analysis](#) of the federal Marine Mammal Inventory Report, which showed on average that animals in captivity live as long, if not longer, in captivity as in the wild.

Stafford also said Dolphinaris is required under federal licensing guidelines to educate the public about conserving the species in their care.

“The trainers will be building a rapport with the guests, answering questions, providing scientific and conservation messages,” he said.

Not so, say critics like biologist Dr. Maddalena Bearzi, the president of the Ocean Conservation Society in Los Angeles. She said learning about wild dolphins from their captive cousins is like comparing apples to oranges.

“They are nothing like the animals they observe in the wild. They don’t behave the same. Socially they are not the same, they don’t have a social life. They are psychologically messed up,” said Bearzi, who's [written extensively on the arguments against keeping cetaceans captive](#).

Meanwhile, keeping dolphins in large tanks can welcome a host of health problems, said Courtney Vail of the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDC), a charity that's involved in an effort to halt construction on Dolphinaris.



(Photo by Katherine Fritke - KJZZ)

The OdySea aquarium next door to Dolphinaris is also slated to open in late summer 2016.

"Dolphins do not thrive in concrete environments," she said, using the example of those living at [the Mirage Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas](#). "They suffer from respiratory problems, they suffer from skin conditions that are a byproduct of stress, there are injuries to the dolphins that participate in interactive programs."

According to [the Las Vegas Review-Journal](#), a bottlenose dolphin died of unknown causes at the Mirage last November at the relatively young age of 12. It was the 15th death at the exhibit since it opened in 1990.

Vail also points to unique health issues faced by animals brought to live in desert environments like Las Vegas and the Valley. According to [the Valley Fever Center for Excellence at the University of Arizona](#), valley fever — a infection caused by fungal spores with symptoms resembling those associated with the flu — can affect marine mammals like sea otters and dolphins.

Unusual cases can crop up by spores being blown over the water where these animals inhale them and become sick.

Transporting Marine Mammals: Smooth Sailing Or Choppy Waters?

Dr. Bearzi said dolphins are incredibly social creatures — they form social and familial structures. So, she said, taking one dolphin away from its pod can be distressing. Not just for that animal but for the entire group.

Indeed, in the following clip from a [1992 NOVA/PBS documentary](#) on the private lives of these highly intelligent creatures, scientists demonstrate how dolphins use their distinct clicks and whistles to interact with each other and recognize friend from foe.

In the clip, researchers find that dolphins recognize the whistles of other members of their pod and behave accordingly.

Then there's the issue of getting them here. It can be traumatic, Bearzi said , plus "you have to take them out of the water, that's not their environment."

Within the United States, dolphin transfers are regulated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Facilities have to submit notice — [the form is easily found online](#) — to NOAA at least 15 days before the planned transport. Once the animals arrive, the facility needs to be licensed by the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) in order to open the exhibit to the public.

Tanya Espinosa with APHIS said licensing is dependent on a facility meeting certain standards laid out under the 1966 [Animal Welfare Act \(AWA\)](#).

“We look to make sure the animals have adequate housing, so their enclosure sizes. Are they the appropriate size for that particular animal? We also look at their sanitation. Are their enclosures clean?” said Espinosa.

A facility has three tries within a 90-day period to pass a scheduled pre-license inspection and meet every standard. If they don't pass, they have to wait six months and reapply.

But that doesn't mean the animals have to be transported elsewhere. Espinosa said animals can stay in their new home, they just can't be exhibited.

“It's up to each state as to whether or not somebody can own those animals," she said.

In the case of Dolphinaris, it's not up to Arizona at all since the facility isn't on state land. It's on the Salt River Pima-Maricopa reservation, so neither the Arizona Game and Fish Department nor the Arizona Department of Agriculture will have any oversight.

Another APHIS spokesperson, R. Andre Bell, said in an email statement that the agency has already met with

the owners of Dolphinaris to discuss the AWA requirements and the licensing process.

Dr. Grey Stafford with Dolphinaris said dolphins like the ones they'll house are typically transported by airplane using safe methods following USDA regulations "that have been implemented successfully for decades." He also said a veterinary and training team will be on hand before, during and after the transfer process to monitor the animals' health.

Entertainment Or Education?

The expanding entertainment district where Dolphinaris is going up includes the OdySea aquarium and Butterfly Wonderland habitat. Nearby is Talking Stick Resort and Casino, the Arizona Diamondbacks' spring training stadium and Top Golf. Some opponents argue its location proves Dolphinaris is more about human pleasure than animal conservation.

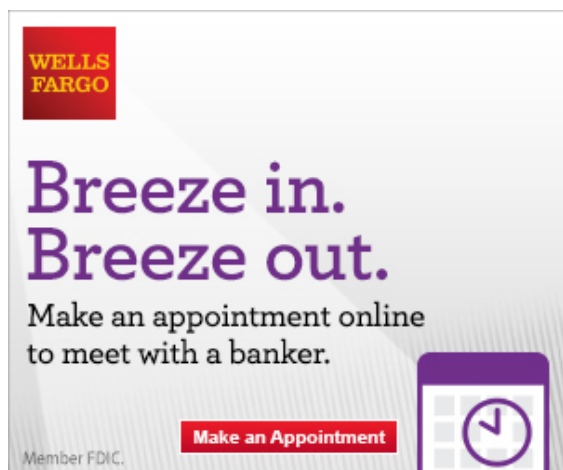
"On an ethical grounds, we believe that's an extremely unnatural message to send to the public, that this isn't about education, it's about entertainment," said Courtney Vail with the WDC charity.

Dolphinaris is owned by the Mexican-based company Ventura Entertainment, which already runs several dolphin encounters south of the border. Representatives with the OdySea aquarium next door said the two facilities are separate entities. However, both are under development company Northern Gateway.

Vail said she's sent letters to the officials heading up the development of Dolphinaris, including the Salt River tribe but has not heard back. In the meantime, she said she's working to educate the public on the potential perils of bringing dolphins to the desert in order to build a "groundswell of opposition" to stop the facility from opening. If that doesn't happen, Vail said she hopes enough people will just say no to a trip to see the dolphins.

Meanwhile, an [online petition](#) started by an independent Scottsdale citizen has been signed by more than 135,000 people against Dolphinaris.

Stafford, meanwhile, said the dolphins are set to arrive in the next few months and Dolphinaris should open to the public in September.



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