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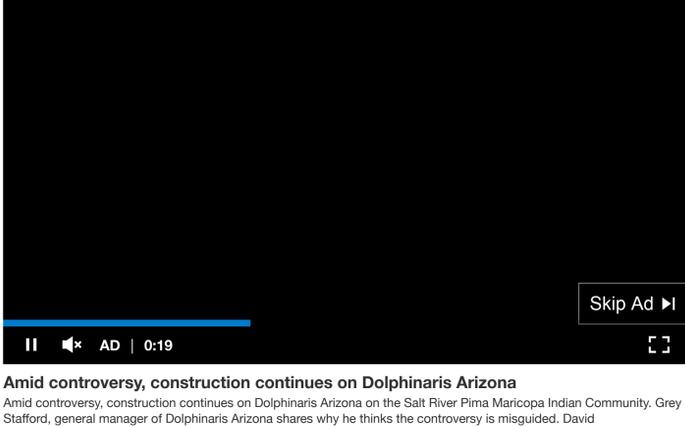
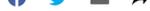
EJ MONTINI | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Montini: Would aquarium visit benefit dolphin prison?

EJ Montini opinion columnist

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Amid controversy, construction continues on Dolphinaris Arizona

Amid controversy, construction continues on Dolphinaris Arizona on the Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community. Grey Stafford, general manager of Dolphinaris Arizona shares why he thinks the controversy is misguided. David Wallace/azcentral.com David Wallace/ The Republic

The reader had a moral dilemma and, even worse, she thought I could resolve it.

"I'm hoping you can give me some advice," she wrote. "I'm the mother of two small children and I was thinking that I'd someday like to take them to the OdySea Aquarium that's opening soon (just outside of Scottsdale on land owned by the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community). It's in the same complex as Dolphinaris, which you've called a 'dolphin prison.' I tend to agree. But I don't believe they're owned by the same people. Is that right? I'm worried that if by going to OdySea I would somehow be supporting Dolphinaris. Would I? P.S. Don't you hate it when information spoils your family entertainment plans?"

After receiving this mom's inquiry I sent a note to the publicist for OdySea.

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Clarity? More like clear as mud

It read:

I was wondering if you might help me out with a question or two I have about the contractual arrangement between OdySea and Dolphinaris. According to news reports Dolphinaris is a "tenant" at the facility, controlled by OdySea. I'm wondering if you might be able to explain to me the specific relationship between the two entities. How did they get together, for instance? Was there a plan to be housed in the same complex from the beginning or was that something that happened after OdySea was already into the project? And what kind of an arrangement is it? A lease of some kind? And for how long? And do the OdySea people have any qualms at all about the controversial dolphin exhibit?

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A few days later I received this response from a spokeswoman from OdySea:

"I appreciate you writing and allowing us to answer your questions and provide some clarity. As you know, the OdySea Aquarium is not affiliated with Dolphinaris. They are two separate attractions, owned and operated by different companies. It is the policy of OdySea Aquarium LLC not to comment on any private businesses that are located at the OdySea in the Desert entertainment destination..."

Montini: Protesters aim to be 'thorn in the side' of dolphin prison near Scottsdale

Provide some clarity?

That doesn't seem very clear to me.

So I sent a note to Dolphinaris, to which a spokeswoman responded:

"The news reports that Dolphinaris is a tenant at the Odysea in the Desert complex are accurate. That's the extent of the business relationship that I know."

Still not so clear.

Does the "tenant" of a complex support the landlord? Or vice versa? Or not?

That's something that conflicted mom will have to decide for herself.

Why I think Dolphinaris is a bad idea

I am not a fan of the concrete water-filled gulag in the middle of the desert that is Dolphinaris, where patrons will spend extravagant amounts of money to "swim" with the prisoners.

For expertise on the matter I look to someone like Maddalena Bearzi, president and co-founder of the Ocean Conservation Society, and co-author of "Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins." She wrote a blog about captive dolphins for National Geographic that reads in part:

"If we consider ourselves as being at the pinnacle of intelligence, dolphins would come just after us, scoring even better than their great ape cousins... (Dolphins) have flexible and remarkable social and communication skills... (They) play, bond, imitate, learn from each other and transfer information from generation to generation... Dolphins, like us, have a limbic system and are able to experience a broad spectrum of emotions including joy, grief, frustration, anger, and love..."

The general manager of Dolphinaris, Dr. Grey Stafford, told a TV reporter, "By having a place like Dolphinaris, we can expose people to what's going on in the world and hopefully create that energy, that empathy, that concern for our oceans."

Controversy: Will tourists soon swim with captive dolphins near Scottsdale?

Really?

Bearzi would disagree, writing, "It's true that, in the past, some captivity studies on dolphins have helped fuel our basic understanding of these animals; an understanding that researchers of that era could not have obtained at sea because of technical and logistical obstacles. But the world and science have changed and we now have the technology and means to more effectively study dolphins in their own habitats."

A concrete cell is not a natural habitat.

The mom who wrote to me about all this is correct. Knowledge can make it difficult to be a parent. Years ago in my ignorance we took our daughter and son to SeaWorld in San Diego, several times, always with excitement and anticipation.

Then I saw the documentary *Blackfish*.

Now I can only say: Shamu, I'm sorry.

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