

Inspection of the captive dolphin facility 'Dolphinella' in Hadaba, Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt



Conducted by Marine Connection – December 2005

Overview

Dolphinella is a captive dolphin facility based in the Hadaba district of Sharm El Sheikh in Egypt. It currently holds three bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*), imported into Egypt from Russia in 2003 under export from Utrish Dolphinarium. On CITES permit number 03RU001099 it is stated that two of these dolphins are captive bred and one wild caught, however the source of the wild caught dolphin is currently unknown due to the lack of information available.

Dolphinella is open six days a week, Monday –Saturday with a daily show at 3pm with an entrance fee of 100LE. Throughout the rest of the day swim with dolphin programmes occur. There are places for 48 participants per day, at a cost of 600LE each. Each swim with dolphin session lasts for 30 minutes.

On 7 December 2005, the Marine Connection's Captivity Officer visited Dolphinella, Sharm el Sheikh to carry out an inspection and the following is a first hand report of what occurred.

At 2.55pm the entrance to the pool was opened to allow visitors to enter. Once through the entrance visitors pass along a tunnel into the seating area. On one side of the tunnel is a poster displaying rules for the facility, **at no time was this pointed out**. Furthermore, due to the location of the sign and because of the number of people passing, it was impossible to stop and read any details. Once inside the seating area you have a choice of seats along one side of the pool.

Pool area

There is one main pool which is 'kidney' shaped measuring approximately 40 metres x 18 metres at the widest parts, and 7 metres deep (this information was received from Mr Wagdy Saad the manager of Dolphinella at an earlier date). Attached to this pool is a secondary pool which is separated by a metal gate. The secondary pool is circular and measures approx 5 metres in diameter. Due to the size of the pool I would conclude it was an isolation pool. Neither of the pools had any overhead cover, meaning that the dolphins spend most of the day exposed to strong, direct sunlight. APHIS regulations require that natural or artificial shelter be provided that is appropriate for the species concerned, when the local climatic conditions are taken into consideration, all marine mammals kept outdoors must be afforded protection from the weather or from direct sunlight. ⁽¹⁾ EAAM regulations also state that shaded or covered areas must be provided in order to protect the animals from adverse conditions.⁽²⁾

The Dolphin 'Show'

Upon taking a seat within the dolphinarium, the first thing I noticed was the dolphin's behaviour. One of the dolphins was swimming slowly around the edge of the pool diving occasionally. The second was swimming slowly back and forth across the width of the pool, whilst the third was stationary 'logging' on the surface with its nose pushed against the side wall of the pool. This animal remained stationary until the show began 20 minutes later at 3.15pm. This type of behaviour would suggest serious health problems.

The show began with music being played over a loud speaker, and two trainers entering into view. The music continued constantly for the duration of the show (30 minutes). EAAM regulations require that dolphins are not subject to loud noise. (3)

The show began with the three dolphins swimming around the pool, making a jump in each of the three areas of the pool (left side, middle, right side). All of the dolphins received food rewards for this. Next the trainers and dolphins were introduced to the audience as they took a lap of the pool. At this stage I noticed that the dolphin I had seen logging had a dorsal fin marking - a notch about ½ way up the trailing edge. The other two dolphins had no dorsal edge markings; however I did see what appeared to be a freeze brand on the dorsal fin of one of the dolphins. This brand was in the shape of three completely filled circles, due to the perfection of the circles, I deduced this mark had to be man-made and not a natural occurrence. Again all three dolphins received a reward.

The first of the tasks involved 3 small rubber hoops (quoits), one for each dolphin, which was thrown for them to retrieve. This task was completed by two of the dolphins, the (**sick) dolphin however returned without retrieving one. Food was given to the two dolphins that had successfully completed the task; however none was offered to the dolphin that had not completed the task and, receiving no food from its trainer the (sick) dolphin then moved to the other trainer begging for food. Next the trainers produced three hula hoops, only two of which were thrown into the pool. All three dolphins left to apparently retrieve the hoops, however the (sick) dolphin didn't appear to know what to do, and the other two dolphins returned with the hoops on their nose. This task was carried out three times; at no time did the (sick) dolphin return with a hoop or receive a food reward.

Next, the two healthy dolphins jumped through hoops that were lowered from overhead cables, whilst the (sick) one stayed at the side of the pool. After this, one of the trainers jumped into the pool to be pushed through the water on the nose of two of the dolphins. The (sick) dolphin was utilized for this task, which was not very successful as the trainer spent half of the time swimming. It was obvious that only one dolphin was actually pushing him. As a result of this a food reward was only given to the dolphin that has successfully completed the task, again the (sick) dolphin received nothing.

Three large foam discs were then thrown into the pool; two of the dolphins returned with their discs very quickly, the third (sick) dolphin returned back to the trainers without its disc. This task was repeated using the two discs, all three dolphins left the side but again only two returned with their discs. Food was again withheld from the (sick) dolphin for not completing the task. This was followed by the dolphins 'singing' to the audience, during this task the (sick) dolphin lost interest and swam away before returning briefly to sing. Once again only two dolphins received food rewards, even although the (sick) dolphin had carried out part of this task.

Both of the trainers then jumped into the pool and waltzed with two of the dolphins, during which time the (sick) dolphin lay on the surface next to them. This lasted for 25 seconds before the trainers and dolphins returned to the side of the pool. Food reward was given to the two dolphins that had participated in the waltzing task. One of the dolphins then beached itself on the side of the pool and by flicking its tail in the water spun itself around. This lasted for 15 seconds. Then all three dolphins beached themselves, resting unsupported on their vital organs for 17 seconds before being pushed back into the water by the nose. The (sick) dolphin appeared only just able to lift itself out onto the side of the pool. Three seconds later they again beached themselves for 11 seconds before being pushed back into the water, following which they immediately beached themselves again for 22 seconds.

This pattern was again repeated for 19 seconds although the (sick) dolphin was only able to remain beached for eight of the 19 seconds. This time all of the dolphins were given a food reward.

One of the dolphins was then taken to one side of the pool where it took part in a painting display, using red and yellow paints. I would like to question the type of paint used, and its' content as I am not familiar with regulations regarding paint sold in Egypt.

A child was then chosen from the audience to participate in a task. She was asked to remove her shoes and led to the far side of the pool where the trainers were located. She was then placed in a small inflatable dingy which was supposed to be towed around the pool by two dolphins, only one was actually pulling whilst the other ((sick)) dolphin swam at its side. After the performance she was presented with the painting that one of the dolphins had done earlier in the show.

One of the trainers then stood on the chest of a dolphin and surfed around the pool. After jumping off the dolphin he took hold of the dorsal fin and was towed back to the side of the pool. Next a trainer climbed a ladder, which looked to be approximately 4 metres in height, located at the side of the pool. Holding a fish in his outreached hand at a height of five metres above the pool, one of the dolphins was then given a signal to jump to retrieve the fish. However, it was not cleanly taken and fell back into the water after the dolphin.

Attached to cables overhanging the pool were three large balls, these were lowered one at a time to approximately three metres above the water. Each dolphin took it in turns to jump out of the water and hit a ball with its tail. All three balls were then lowered at the same time, and although they jumped, the dolphins missed their target and none made contact with the balls.

The trainers and dolphins then took a lap of honour around the pool to signal the end of the show, this was followed by the dolphins doing three synchronised leaps in the three areas (left side, middle right side) of the pool. After returning to their trainers they beached themselves for 30 seconds. Once they were back in the water, individually two of the three dolphins swam around the pool doing jumps; however the remaining (sick) dolphin did not take part in this, staying at the side of the pool.

Throughout the show loud music was played over a p.a system, no information was given about the dolphins except for their names. There was absolutely no verbal content that could be classed as either educational or to convey a conservation message to the watching audience, the entire show lacked these two requirements; it was reminiscent of shows which you would have seen in the UK 20 years ago and could only be described as an aquatic "circus".

Photograph Session

At the end of the show the audience were asked if they wished to have their photograph taken with the dolphins. After paying, each person was led to the far side of the pool and asked to remove their shoes. One or two of the dolphins then beached themselves for the picture. The person to be photographed then walked up to the dolphins and had their photograph taken either hugging, kissing or stroking the dolphins. It was observed that none of the participants were required to dip their feet in an antiseptic solution tray, asked to remove any jewellery or wash their hands/arms. Participants were seen wearing rings, watches and bracelets whilst posing for their photographs. It can also be surmised that due to the hot weather, some of them would also have been wearing sun screen. (4)

The entire process of taking photographs lasted approximately 15-20 minutes, during which time the dolphins involved were repeatedly instructed to beach themselves. Although the dolphins returned to the water between each photograph, they were kept on the side of the pool for up to a minute per photograph. It was noted that only two dolphins were involved in the photograph session, the (sick) dolphin had returned to 'logging' at the side of the pool and played no interactive part whatsoever.

Dolphin Swims

Three days later on 10th December part of a dolphin swim programme was also witnessed, however due to facility regulations, no photographs or video footage was taken. Videos are however for sale to the participants after the programme.

1. Each participant pays 600LE (£60) for a 30 minute session and there are 48 places available each day.
2. Two people are allowed per dolphin and each of the 3 dolphins participates in eight sessions per day (48 people / 3 dolphins = 16 people per dolphin per day / 2 people per session = 8 sessions). As each session lasts for 30 minutes, the total interaction time for swim programmes is four hours for each dolphin. APHIS regulations state that the recommended maximum interaction period for dolphins used in swim programmes is no more than two hours per day. Dolphinella's dolphins are doing twice that amount.
3. People of any age can swim with the dolphins, I enquired if a five year old was allowed to take part and was told that children even younger that this had previously participated in the swim with dolphins programme. ⁽⁵⁾
4. The dolphin swims occur in the same pool as the show. Previous reports and footage from Dolphinella showed that the swim program had been conducted in the shallow area of the pool. On the occasion of my visit the entire pool was in use, each area of the pool (left, middle, right) had one dolphin and two participants. APHIS regulations recommend that 'The primary enclosure for SWTD cetaceans contain an interactive area, a buffer area, and a sanctuary area. None of these areas shall be made uninviting to the animals. Movement of cetaceans into the buffer or sanctuary area shall not be restricted in any way'. No such areas exist at Dolphinella, therefore this facility are operating against regulations set out for dolphin swim programmes. ⁽⁶⁾
5. The gate between the main pool and 'isolation' was permanently closed. Due to the design of this facility, the element of choice has been removed from the dolphins, meaning they are forced to participate in the session. All three of the dolphins were involved in the swim programme, this included the (sick) dolphin. Due to behaviour witnessed during my visit and also from footage obtained previously, I would have strong concerns about this dolphin participating in a swim programme, for both the health of the animal and human participants.
6. As I did not witness the commencement of the swim programme I am unable to comment as to whether participants were asked to shower before entering the water, however I did notice that many appeared to be wearing some sort of sun lotion or sunscreen. I also observed that some participants were wearing jewellery, which can injure a dolphins' sensitive skin. During the swim program participants are towed by the dolphins' dorsal fin and pectoral fins and also 'waltz' with the dolphin. Participants were witnessed hugging and kissing the dolphins on numerous occasions. I also witnessed the dolphins being touched around the blow holes area and previous video footage clearly shows touching and stoking in the area of the dolphins genitalia. This

behaviour can result in the animals becoming excited and can result in potential injury to participants.

7. Only a few of the participants were wearing life jackets whilst in the water. It is standard practice in the dolphinarium industry for all participants to wear life jackets for safety.

Summary

From the limited observations that I was able to carry out at this facility on these occasions, I found it lacked any regard for the health of its dolphins. Whilst the pool size does meet requirements set by APHIS and EAAM for three dolphins, the above findings show that it drastically falls short of meeting all other requirements and standards.

Recommendations

I would recommend that a full inspection be carried out at this facility with full access to the dolphins, veterinary reports and equipment. This inspection should involve Egyptian representatives, CITES officers, dolphin behaviour specialists and an external veterinarian. Further it is essential that a representative from the Marine Connection, plus our marine mammal veterinarian also be present in our professional capacity as dolphin and whale welfare experts, to ensure that guidelines are followed.

Marine Connection

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Reference Notes & Abbreviations

APHIS: Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, USA

EAAM: European Association for Aquatic Mammals

** (sick) In my professional opinion

- (1) This is especially important for dolphins as water temperatures in enclosures can be considerably higher than those the species encounter in the wild, where they have the choice to move into deeper, cooler water. (Source: APHIS 3.103 b)
- (2) EAAM regulation 2.g.iii Open air facilities.
- (3) EAAM regulation 3. Cetaceans shall be protected from harassment by excessive noise, including noise from irregular impulses.
- (4) In the USA and Europe, in dolphin facilities it is required that jewellery be removed as it may scratch or injure the dolphins and sun screen/sun lotion must be washed off prior to touching dolphins as it can damage the dolphins' skin and be extremely painful and potentially damaging if it gets into their eyes.
- (5) Conversation with female employee at Dolphinella, her job is to book the swim with dolphin sessions.
- (6) APHIS regulation 3.111 a. Swim with dolphin programs.

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