

[The Sydney Morning Herald](#)

[Print this article](#) | [Close this window](#)

# Aqua park or prison? The great divide over Sea World's captive dolphins

Tim Elliott

**Published:** November 7 2015 - 12:00AM

**With countries phasing out the captivity of "man's best friend in the ocean", the Gold Coast's Sea World dolphinarium looks like an endangered species. Or is it? Tim Elliott meets those working on both sides of a highly emotional divide.**

Recently I visited Sea World, on the Gold Coast, with an animal liberationist named June Killington. Killington, 58, is a former London punk and one-time backup singer for Adam and the Ants who, in the 1970s, published a punk rock fanzine called Halitosis. Since then, she has worked as a booking agent and a secretary, and run her own advertising agency. Her true calling, however, is animals. In the 1990s, she infiltrated then prime minister Paul Keating's piggery to shoot covert footage, which she gave to Channel Seven. She has also picketed fur shops and campaigned, with some success, to shut down puppy factories.

But for the past two years she has focused on Sea World, which she calls an "aquaprison" where "dolphins that have been stolen from the ocean or bred in captivity perform tricks every day for dead fish".

It's late afternoon when we turn up to Sea World, driving into the car park in Killington's hatchback, which is plastered with "I'm against dolphin captivity" and "Sea World sucks" stickers. Killington is dressed in black, with a chunky gold necklace and hair the colour of Ribena. In the Klieg-light glare of Surfers Paradise, she sticks out like a goth at a beach party. She is also the most profane woman I have ever met, spraying around expletives like blasts from an Uzi. "Look at this f...ing place, would you," she mutters, gazing with undiluted scorn at the theme park's gates. "What a f...ing disgrace."

Sea World is home to 31 dolphins, 32 seals, four polar bears and lots of sharks, all of them housed in a series of pools and man-made lagoons. The park runs regular dolphin and seal shows, as well as other displays, such as Jet Stunt Extreme, which is just winding up as Killington and I walk through the gates. The show features two guys on jet skis tooling about on the main lagoon, doing loops and 360s, accompanied by the kind of hair-metal guitar music that sounds like a tin shed full of hand drills.

Killington shakes her head. "Dolphins work on echolocation. Their hearing is very acute. That's why people like Joan Jett stopped SeaWorld in the US from using her music."

We take off around the park, Killington radiating an anguished contempt, like a vegan in an abattoir.

"They hate us, these dolphins," she says. "If they could talk, they would say, 'You motherf...ers.'" She has brought with her a stack of glossy postcards. The postcards look legitimate, with the Sea World logo beneath a picture of a cheery-looking dolphin. Flip it over, however, and it reads: "DON'T BUY A TICKET TO ANIMAL CRUELTY. Open your mind and your heart and know that cetaceans are not here to amuse and entertain us. Go to Sea World SHUT DOWN on Facebook for more information." As we walk around, Killington hands these cards to everyone she meets, including staff, even popping into the toilets to leave stacks of them beside handbasins.

Soon we come to another lagoon, which, according to a placard, is home to a dolphin named Howie. Within seconds, Howie appears, rolling on his side to fix us with an unblinking, plaintive stare. "Hi sweetie," Killington coos. "I'm so sorry you're in that shitty little pond. I'm a f...ing human and yes, I'm so embarrassed."

Howie then begins chewing his tongue, sticking it out, like a thick pink sausage, and clamping down on it. At first I take this to be a cheeky gesture:

Howie is poking his tongue at us! But Killington is stricken. "Look, he's chewing his f...ing tongue! That's not normal! Oh f...! We've got to get him out!"

For a moment, it appears she might leap into the pond. Instead, she leans against the fence, her head flopped down, defeated. "Let's go. I've seen enough."

We exit through the gift shop, where Killington stops to smuggle some of her postcards into the bins groaning with soft toys. "Who knows," she says. "Someone might pick a postcard up, turn it over, and actually f...ing learn something."

**It's tempting to dismiss Killington** as a crank. She prefers to think of herself as a "warrior" on the front line of an animal welfare battle that is fast entering the mainstream. Most animal protection groups in Australia and overseas now believe it is wrong to keep cetaceans – dolphins, porpoises and whales – in captivity, and many have launched campaigns to end the "public display industry", in which dolphins are kept for entertainment.

"These animals should not be in captivity, full stop," says Glenys Oogjes, executive director of Animals Australia. "Some facilities may be better at it than others, but there is no captive situation that can provide for all the behavioural needs of these animals."

Oogjes has been involved in animal welfare since 1980, when every state in Australia had at least one dolphinarium. In 1985, she provided submissions to a Senate select committee on animal welfare that found that cetaceans in captivity suffer from stress, behavioural abnormalities, high mortality rates, decreased longevity and breeding problems.

The committee subsequently recommended that no more dolphinariums be set up, and that those in existence be phased out, which is what subsequently happened to the facilities in South Australia, Western Australia and Victoria. Only two dolphinariums now remain in Australia: Sea World and Dolphin Marine Magic, a smaller operation in Coffs Harbour, on the NSW North Coast, that has also attracted controversy over the treatment of its animals.

Many countries around the world are phasing out the keeping of dolphins in captivity: the UK, Switzerland, Hungary, Chile and India have banned it. Finland recently announced it is closing its last dolphinarium, and there are various bills underway in US and Canadian states that aim to do likewise.

With the possible exception of lions, it's hard to think of a wild animal that has been invested with more meaning than the dolphin. Sleek, gregarious and apparently benign, they are the perfect embodiment of an idealised nature: man's best friend in the ocean. Stories abound of dolphins helping shipwrecked sailors and rescuing surfers from marauding sharks; in Douglas Adams' cult book, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, it is the dolphins that attempt – unsuccessfully – to warn human beings of the Earth's impending demise.

As the body of research into dolphins has grown, so, too, have the arguments against their captivity. Dolphins have larger brains relative to their body size than any other non-human animal, including chimpanzees. They have an intricate neocortex and spindle-shaped neurons, which have been linked in humans to intuition and empathy. Experiments show that they possess self-awareness, a quality previously only seen in humans and great apes. They're also good with tools: zoologist Anuschka de Rohan has described how bottlenose dolphins off the coast of Western Australia place sponges over their snouts to protect them from stonefish and stingrays as they forage over seabeds.

Dolphins live in highly complex and fluid social networks, and are migratory animals, ranging over hundreds, if not thousands of kilometres of open ocean. "If you had to design an animal that was not a good fit for a theme-park environment, a dolphin would be it," says Lori Marino, a former senior lecturer in neuroscience and behavioural biology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. "There is no amount of space you can give them in a marine park that is anywhere near what they need."

Marino has spent 25 years studying cetacean brains and cognition and is the founder of the Kimmela Center for Animal Advocacy. She also appeared in the 2013 documentary *Blackfish*, about a captive bull orca, Tilikum, who has been involved in the deaths of three people, including his trainer, Dawn Brancheau, whom he scalped and then drowned in 2010 during a live performance at SeaWorld in Florida. SeaWorld's net income dropped 84 per cent following the documentary's release, and its share price has more than halved. (Sea World in Australia has no commercial links to the SeaWorld group in the United States.)

According to Marino, all captive animals may display abnormal, or "stereotypic" behaviours, known collectively as "zoochosis". Elephants suffering zoochosis might repetitively sway their heads; tigers obsessively pace. In cetaceans, such behaviours include bobbing or lolling on the surface (also known as "logging"), scraping their snouts against the grates, or swimming in circles. According to Marino, tongue biting is "totally abnormal behaviour".

They can also die of boredom. "They can lose the will to live; it's called a 'failure to thrive'," says Marino. "It's a syndrome you see in human babies and other captive animals, such as great apes, and it's one of the reasons we see high mortality rates for infant cetaceans in captivity. They stop eating, lose weight, and then just die. We have seen that in bottlenose dolphins, beluga whales and orcas."

One of the problems, according to Marino, is that mothers don't know how to care for their babies. "This is because often they have been captured as babies themselves. In the wild, they are helped by other females. They learn from their own mothers and other siblings, and if they don't have that opportunity, they don't know what to do with their own young."

**The day after I meet Killington**, I pay a visit to Trevor Long, Sea World's director of marine sciences. Long has worked at Sea World since 1973 and was involved in the collection of many of its animals. Killington had described him as some kind of monster, but he seems perfectly amiable, if a little defensive, with a snow-white beard and skin cured to a rich caramel by decades of UV exposure.

"I'm a little frustrated by this kind of criticism," says Long, who meets me in a conference room in Sea World Resort, a 400-room hotel adjacent to the park. "Critics base their arguments on intelligence. And yes, dolphins are highly social and intelligent, but so are lots of other species, like elephants, big cats, octopuses. So it's really an issue of social benefits."

Sea World gets 1.5 million visitors a year. "Most of these people come from general suburbia," says Long. "They are not watching David Attenborough, they are playing Xbox. If they come here and develop an empathy and appreciation for the animals, they'll be more likely to take action to protect them."

Long seems baffled by the proposition that his animals might suffer from being held in captivity. "We have 110 staff in marine sciences," he says. "Do you think there could be an issue with suffering or cruelty without one of them speaking up?"

He similarly dismisses the idea that Sea World "kidnaps" dolphins from the wild, since, apart from anything else, taking dolphins from the wild for commercial use is illegal in Australia.

About 80 per cent of the park's dolphins have been bred in captivity, he explains. The rest come from aquaria that have closed, or are animals that have been rescued and cannot be released. "And the decision about which animals are kept isn't up to us, it's up to the Department of Environment and Heritage Protection."

In the wider community, Sea World enjoys a cast-iron brand. This is due in part to its well-earned reputation for rescue and rehabilitation. Long and his team frequently head out at all hours of the day and night to untangle dolphins from fishing nets or haul whales off beaches or extract turtles from boat propellers. "These operations are expensive," Long says. "The last dolphin rescue, we had four boats and 17 staff out there all day." Animal rights groups applaud such work. ("Trevor risks his life rescuing dolphins," says Sue Arnold, from Australians for Animals. "I have an immense respect for him.")

Despite this, they are sceptical about the park's research claims. Sea World's website lists 84 marine research projects it has funded in the past 10 years, 65 of which have been included in peer-reviewed publications.

Such projects are a "fig leaf", according to Sarah Lucas, from Australia for Dolphins, a Melbourne-based group with more than 120,000 supporters. "Dolphinaria like Sea World claim they are helping conservation through research," she says, "when really they are businesses making money through commercial dolphin shows."

Parks such as Sea World generally don't keep endangered species; they keep bottlenose dolphins, which are abundant in the wild. "So it's pretty transparent that it's not about conservation. It's about money."

Sea World's gate takings are estimated at more than \$133 million annually. Of that it spends \$1 million on rescue, research and rehabilitation, or three-quarters of 1 per cent.

**Long is an excellent salesman.** He leads me on a tour of the park, past swaying palms and glinting pools, riffing seamlessly on its myriad virtues: the man-made, sand-bottomed lagoons, the "enriched environments", the high-tech multimillion-dollar pool filtration systems (animal rights groups claim that captive dolphins inevitably end up swimming in their own excreta) – even his animals' increased life spans. "It's been proved categorically that animals in captivity live longer than those in the wild," he says, "because they're not subject to predation and have access to better healthcare."

He introduces me to some of the trainers, all of whom seem kind and conscientious. I ask if they have been asked to sign confidentially agreements, as Killington and others claim, but they say no. "The only thing they can't do is take photos behind the scenes," Long says, "for safety reasons." (Long also prohibits photography in the polar bears' rear enclosure, which is a series of caged corridors, as this "would not be showing the animals in their best light".)

The park certainly looks good, which is part of the problem. For a lay observer, it's hard to tell a happy dolphin from an unhappy dolphin, thanks to the fact that they always appear to be smiling. "The thing is that a dolphin's face is fixed in the expression of a smile, even when it's dead," Sarah Lucas says. "The shape of the mouth evolved to be efficient for catching fish. In dolphins, unlike in humans, facial expression is not related to emotional state."

The dolphins' performances are another contentious area. Long says that his dolphins enjoy the shows, and that "they are enriched by the activity". Besides, if any of the animals indicate that they don't want to participate, "we don't make them".

Dolphins have a high food drive, as do Australian fur seals, which is why marine parks use fish as a reward. "But we certainly don't starve them! These animals are worth a fortune. You really think we wouldn't feed them?" In a recent interview with the Gold Coast Bulletin, Long said that his dolphins "don't perform for food, they perform for interaction. It is no different to a dog that wants to please its owner."

This is debatable. "It is naive to imagine that the animals are doing their tricks to please the crowd," says Paul McGreevy, a professor of animal behaviour and animal welfare science at the University of Sydney. McGreevy is the author of *Carrots and Sticks: Principles of Animals Training*, which examines training techniques and the ethics of keeping animals in captivity.

The book features chapters on several Australian zoos and on the dolphins at Sea World. "You have to get the animal's hunger level just right before a performance," he says. "You see some very agitated seals and sea lions just before their performance, because they know they are going to be fed but that they have to do a performance before that happens."

On one occasion, McGreevy witnessed seals rocking rhythmically from side to side before a performance at an Australian zoo. "I raised it with the keepers, but they told me it was just excitement."

**In *Life of Pi***, the Man Booker Prize-winning novel by Yann Martel, the young narrator offers an impassioned defence of zoos and rejects the notion that animals are somehow better off living "free" in the wild. "Animals in the wild lead lives of compulsion and necessity within an unforgiving social hierarchy," the narrator says, "in an environment where the supply of fear is high and the supply of food low and where territory must constantly be defended and parasites forever endured. What is the meaning of freedom in such a context?"

This is a good question. Like Pi, Trevor Long argues that life in the wild is no picnic. "People have this mystic sense about dolphins, that they are some pure being," he told the *Gold Coast Bulletin* earlier this year. "But in the wild, males will take a female away and rape it and rape it and rape it." The female may even die, he says. "But we are able to manage that situation in our environments." Dolphins have also been known to practise infanticide, and there are reports of them killing porpoises, in murderous rages unrelated to the need for food.

In light of this, some animal rights initiatives can seem misguided, even absurd. In 2011, the American Association for the Advancement of Science convened a meeting of conservationists, philosophers and animal behaviourists. Its aim was to develop a declaration of rights for cetaceans, the clauses of which included that "no cetacean should be held in captivity or servitude" and that "cetaceans should have the right not to be subject to the disruption of their cultures".

In 2012, the American branch of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) launched a court case to have whales protected under human slavery laws, arguing that the 13th Amendment of the US Constitution, which prohibits human slavery, be applied to whales. (It lost.)

It is possible that such actions are ambit claims, exercises in envelope-pushing that invite people to examine more deeply their relationship to animals.

According to Paul McGreevy, "animal welfare is an idea whose time has come. It's a social justice issue now." But marine theme parks may muddy the waters, he says; while showcasing the animals' ability to learn, they can also give visitors the impression that seals and dolphins are mere tools in the hands of their trainers. As Lynda Stoner from Animal Liberation NSW puts it: "All these places do is teach human dominion over other animals."

**Sea World certainly has its supporters.** "It is absolutely the lesser evil," says Sue Arnold, from Australians for Animals. "I have been to the most appalling aquaria in Mexico, Canada and Europe. There are a hell of a lot of places I'd be shutting down before Sea World." Arnold says she "doesn't know of any dolphinarium that has their standard", and that she "would always work with Trevor [Long]". Yet she remains conflicted. "Given the amount of animals he rescues, it's an incredible contradiction for him to be involved in the captive industry."

Arnold is similarly worried by Sea World's involvement in establishing marine parks in Asia. In 2012, Sea World's owner, Village Roadshow, struck a deal with a Chinese company to develop Ocean Paradise, a marine theme park in Hainan which is to be stocked with dolphins and beluga whales. Long is to head up Village Roadshow's involvement in the project. "The culture in Asia is not exactly animal-friendly," Arnold says. "If it takes off in Asia, aquariums will explode and the abuse and the potential for abuse will explode."

There is also concern over the park's beluga whales. It is difficult to breed belugas in captivity, which is why the majority are sourced from the wild. The US National Marine Fisheries Service recently blocked the importation of 18 beluga whales for a marine park in Atlanta on the basis that the whales had been captured from a wild population in Russia that "may be declining", and that five of them may have been taken from their mothers while still nursing. There was speculation that some of these belugas would end up in Hainan, but Long denies this.

**Mahatma Gandhi said** "the greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated". But morals progress unevenly: seemingly static one moment, leaping ahead the next. It used to be okay to make elephants perch on circus stools. Now it's not. "It's about educating the public, and changing expectations," Lori Marino says. "Most people would be interested in seeing the rescue and rehabilitation work that these parks do. But the parks think that sales will be greater by showing dolphins jumping through hoops."

In the meantime, the shifting of expectations will be left to people such as June Killington. At Sea World, I watch as she engages a middle-aged woman and her two children. "What do you think of the dolphins being locked up?" Killington asks her. The woman shrugs. "Nothing really. Look at them. They're not being badly treated."

"Okay then, would you like to be locked up like that, fed dead fish and forced to do tricks every day?" The woman pauses for a moment, stares at Killington, then rolls her eyes and walks away.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/good-weekend/aqua-park-or-prison-the-great-divide-over-sea-worlds-captive-dolphins-20151022-gkfl7o.html>

## Most Read Articles

### [The Sydney Morning Herald](#)

[Former Newcastle Knights players cheat death at Mount Everest](#)

[Sophie breaks the nation's heart on The Bachelorette](#)

[Sydney residents warned to prepare for stormy weather](#)

[Under 40 and Insta famous: Emily joins Young Rich list with \\$32m](#)

[The difference between Australia's haves and have nots](#)

### [The Age](#)

[Accused Tiger faces club sanction over topless photo](#)

[Sophie breaks the nation's heart on The Bachelorette](#)

['Thousands' to join class action against Dutton over detention](#)

[The difference between Australia's haves and have nots](#)

[The secret school files that record every student stuff-up](#)

### [Brisbane Times](#)

[Power outages, emergency calls, damaging winds after hailstorm](#)

[Riverside Expressway traffic in gridlock after police incident](#)

[Crisis communications firm brought in as principal stood down](#)

[Sophie breaks the nation's heart on The Bachelorette](#)

[Seven years of CityCycle leaves Brisbane \\$13 million in the red](#)

### [Canberra Times](#)

[Killer dog was victim's 'best friend', but known to be dangerous](#)

[Canberra issued with thunderstorm alert](#)

[Michaelia Cash staffer quits after tipping off media about raids](#)

[Car hits pond in Anzac Parade crash](#)

[Sophie breaks the nation's heart on The Bachelorette](#)

### [WA Today](#)

['We just take the abuse, the bullying': The human cost of WA's FIFO economy](#)

[WA man whose brutal assault left ex-partner feeding through a tube could walk free in a year](#)

[Accused Tiger faces club sanction over topless photo](#)

[Hopping mad: the most West Australian insurance claim ever](#)

[WA woman rescues five-year-old girl swept out to sea](#)