

Hunted and Imprisoned

With the annual Taiji hunt starting in September, [Georgia Woodroffe](#) goes into detail about the horrors facing whales and dolphins

Sunday 25 August 2013



The horrific treatment whales and dolphins are subjected to worldwide has been highlighted recently in the explosive documentaries 'The Cove' (2009) and 'Blackfish' (2013). The method of capture (herding in groups (pods) using boats, helicopters and sometimes explosives, to then extract the young ones) often leaves pods and their calves permanently damaged, particularly emotionally as cetaceans have extremely intricate social relations. From here a life of captivity is one of stress, depression and trauma - often halving their average life span.

Whaling, pollution and by-catching (getting trapped in fishing nets) have contributed to many species becoming at risk: out of the 11 species of great whales, 7 are listed as endangered. The Hector's dolphin, found in the seas around New Zealand, has plummeted in numbers from 30,000 to around 7,000 since the 1970s, mainly due to the fishing industry. While in 'The Cove' it is said that the number of dolphins and porpoises killed in Japan, in the Taiji dolphin drive hunt, amounts to a staggering 23,000 dolphins and porpoises every year.

Captivity

After the trauma of capture, cetaceans often die from injury and shock during the cruel transportation process to entertainment parks. Of those that do survive (in terms of dolphins) 53% die within the first three months of confinement. The number of dolphins bred in captivity does not equal the number that die - the practice is unsustainable.

We are still only at the surface of knowing the full mental ability of these creatures, but, due to their complex pod relations, long term memory, inventive and problem solving skills, along with their own advanced communicative ability, we know that cetaceans are one of the most intelligent animal orders on Earth. One way in which to view their potential intelligence is by looking at their ratio of brain size to body size, which for bottlenose dolphins is 5.6 - second only to humans with 7.6.

In combining their intelligence with a complete alienation from their natural social and physical environment, it is understandable that in captivity cetaceans can disputably become psychotic, as in the case of the orca Tilikum (analysed in 'Blackfish'). Research indicates that the stress of confinement often results in behavioural abnormalities, illness, and a decreased resistance to disease: captive dolphins often

suffering and dying from intestinal disease, stress-related illness and chlorine poisoning.

Whales and dolphins travel up to 99 miles a day in the wild, hunt for food and play with one another; but in captivity they are left for long periods of time without stimulation or exercise. In performance they are overwhelmed by the noise levels with their sensitive hearing; a method of control used by the trainers is the withholding of food, often used to coerce them into doing repetitive and unnatural behaviours for the public. They are even trained to beach themselves despite the danger of doing so.

Their social relations are also wrecked, as they naturally travel in pods of up to 30 related individuals. In the case of Orca, when females and males are put together in close proximity (in the wild males keeping their distance on the outskirts of the pod from the dominant females) attacks take place to establish hierarchy.

Discoveries into their mental abilities led to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in their 2012 conference, to reiterate its support for a cetacean bill of rights, where they will be listed as 'non-human persons', believing that they are intelligent enough to have the same ethical rights as humans; which would ultimately lead to an end to whaling and their captivity if the bill is globally recognised.

Richard O'Barry, the dolphin trainer for the show 'Flipper' in the 1960s, stars in 'The Cove' and mentions how one of the dolphins he worked with, Kathy, committed suicide in his arms by deciding to stop breathing (respiration a conscious effort for cetaceans). It was this sign of misery which set him on his journey over the last 4 decades to free as many whales and dolphins from captivity as possible.

Whaling

Despite bans on commercial whaling and trade in whale products, Japan, Norway and Iceland annually kill 2,000 whales between them (usually fin, minke, bryde's, sei, humpback and sperm whales) and continue to trade in whale products. The ban on commercial whaling was introduced in 1986 by the IWC (the International Whale Commission). Japan, Norway and Iceland have managed to continue whaling by finding loopholes in the ban, for instance hunting for 'scientific purposes'.

Whaling is driving these incredible mammals to extinction by systematic over-exploitation. In the Antarctic alone, more than two million whales were killed by commercial whalers during the 20th century.

Dolphins are also subjected to this practice for their meat, and to be sold for the entertainment industry. This happens particularly brutally in Japan, Taiji, where migrating dolphins are herded into the coves and are massacred with spears and knives, left to bleed to death in the blood bath (investigated in 'The Cove') which starts every September. Despite the monstrosity of the practice, it is also alarmingly dangerous for public health, with the dolphin meat high in levels of mercury.

Other threats

Cetaceans are further threatened by being struck by ships, disturbed by the noise from navy operations and seismic surveys, chemical pollution from industry waste and leaks, and also due to the depletion of prey as a result of over-fishing. 'Almost 1,000 whales, dolphins and porpoises die every day in nets and fishing gear. That's one every two minutes' says Dr Susan Lieberman, the director of WWF's Global Species Programme.

The overall situation for cetaceans looks bleak, however, with improvements in the fishing business, a change in the entertainment industry by focusing on appreciating these social animals in their natural environment, and a spread in awareness of their situation, can lead to a safer future for these gentle giants.



5 comments

Save Cetaceans!

25 Aug '13 at 6:06 pm

This is just one of the many websites where you can find petitions to save cetaceans:
<http://savejapandolphins.org/>

 Report

henny matthieu

26 Aug '13 at 8:43 am

stop stop stop

 Report

Kimber

26 Aug '13 at 11:02 am

It will all come around...Humans will succeed in killing everything off , including ourselves and the world will belong to the lovely land and sea animals once again and truly the way it should be. Only humans destroy and take from the world.

 Report

Kerry Bartell

26 Aug '13 at 7:26 pm

What does all this say about mankind!
It makes me feel so sad. Such beautiful creatures, such dreadful people perpetrating these crimes.

 Report

Marine

26 Aug '13 at 11:13 pm

Hello all!

Check this out!

<https://soundcloud.com/marinelife-1/tradition-in-disguise>

 Report

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