

SEA LEAKS:

Insider accounts of
SEA LIFE aquariums

SEA

LIES

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Captive Animals' Protection Society

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SEA LEAKS:

Insider accounts of SEA LIFE aquariums

In April 2014, The Captive Animals' Protection Society (CAPS) launched a campaign in response to growing concerns over the operation of the world's largest aquarium brand, SEA LIFE aquariums. The campaign launch followed a detailed investigation and revealed a number of shocking truths about the company, which is owned by global entertainment giant, Merlin Entertainments.

Conservation, education and animal welfare were scrutinised during the investigation and major concerns were raised on each of these issues. In addition, it was revealed that, despite claiming to be opposed to the keeping of cetaceans (whales and dolphins) in captivity, Merlin operates a three-times-daily whale circus-style show in its Shanghai centre. There is absolutely no mention of the whales on any Merlin or SEA LIFE websites yet the shows continue in the face of increasing public backlash. Given the sheer amount of false information provided by SEA LIFE staff to our investigator during the information-gathering period and the misleading messages put out in the public domain by the company itself, the campaign was entitled "SEA LIES".

Detailed information and reports relating to this investigation can be found by visiting www.sea-lies.org.uk.

Since the launch, a number of current and former members of staff of the company have come forward to express their own concerns and these revealing accounts have shed light on some of the darkest corners of SEA LIFE's operation. Here we share these important insights into the inner workings of a company which makes the following claim:

"Here at SEA LIFE we care deeply about our oceans, the creatures that live above and beneath the surface and those we are lucky enough to have in our care. We are experts in husbandry and will only keep creatures that we know will thrive in the displays we create for them".

Read on to make up your own mind...

INSIDER ACCOUNT #1:

Weekly deliveries of wild-caught animals

SEA LIFE's Weymouth centre receives large quantities of wild-caught fish in weekly deliveries. The fish are caught for the aquarium trade from delicate wild habitats including the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, where one of SEA LIFE's major suppliers operates from. Two major fish suppliers were used with dozens of fish arriving weekly.

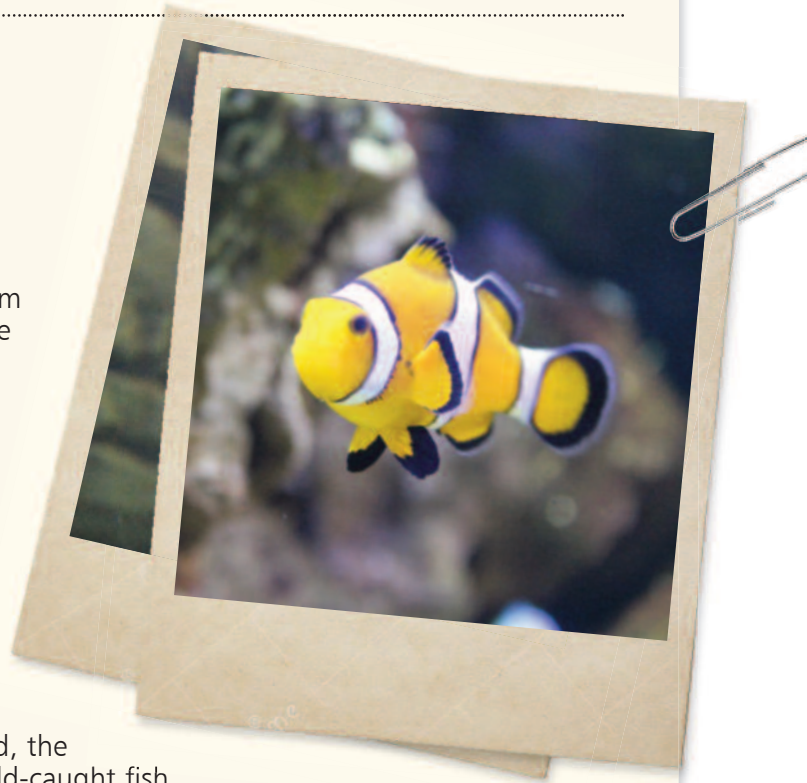
As part of its education work, SEA LIFE tells visitors that they can help to protect coral reefs, telling them: "Don't touch anything if you go snorkelling and never buy products made from coral or other marine creatures".

The insider told us that in a three week period, the Weymouth centre received six deliveries of wild-caught fish from two different suppliers; Cairns Marine and TMC.

The company fails to mention that they regularly pay companies to remove marine animals from coral reefs.

Other deliveries are taken from UK-based fishermen. Species including rays, crabs, oysters and urchins are delivered, said the whistleblowers. Some are used to feed other fish. Despite removing rays from the sea, SEA LIFE fails to mention this in its education pack which highlights the threats to rays caused by fishing and tells visitors not to eat ray species.

During the initial CAPS investigation, the investigator was told by numerous staff that no animals were ever taken from the wild. Others admitted that some were, but implied it was in exceptional circumstances. An insider told CAPS that the only animal captive bred at the Weymouth site were jellyfish and seahorses.



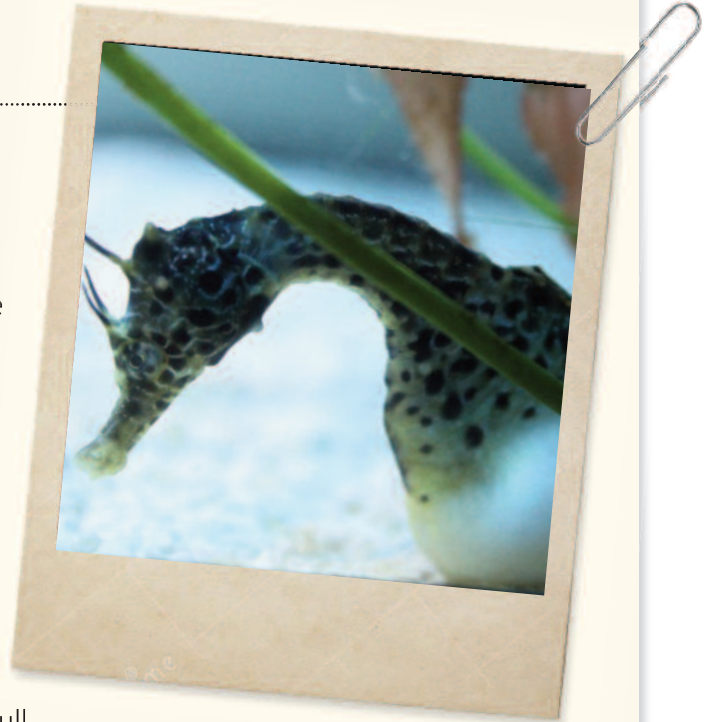
INSIDER ACCOUNT #2:

Killing seahorse babies

Despite SEA LIFE's claims of expertise in seahorse breeding, a member of staff found dozens of baby seahorses had become trapped in one of the tank's filtration systems. When they were found more than half were already dead. When the member of staff began to move them to safety in another empty tank a more senior employee said not to bother as they were to be killed because there was neither food nor manpower to look after them. When questioned over why the company was breeding animals it knew it had no resources to care for, the senior member of staff said that they breed them until the aquariums were full to capacity and then any extra were not needed. It was confirmed that no controls were placed on breeding (e.g. separating male and female) as the business preferred to save space by keeping all animals of the same species in one tank.

SEA LIFE promotes its endangered seahorse breeding programme widely, saying "The project, to breed and protect these beautiful sea creatures is one of our major commitments to conservation". No seahorses are released to the wild by SEA LIFE and youngsters are, according to the insider, regularly killed.

Senior staff refused to tell the employee how the animals would be killed.



INSIDER ACCOUNT #3 & #4:

Penguin chick deaths

One insider reported a penguin chick dying at around one week old because the staff were unable to feed it. The death was put down in part to staff inexperience. Previously, another penguin born at the same centre was allegedly trampled to death during a late night event at the aquarium. Staff had reportedly warned that the noise could disrupt the penguins but the warnings went unheeded.



INSIDER ACCOUNT #5:

Dead animals dumped in the bin

Some of the wild-caught fish regularly delivered to SEA LIFE aquariums from Australia's Great Barrier Reef die on the long journey. A number of fish have been found dead on arrival. These animals were "bagged up and binned". An insider said there was little reaction to the arrival of dead animals. It was expected that some would perish on the journey.



INSIDER ACCOUNT #6:

SEA LIFE supply base refuses to send animals to SEA LIFE Birmingham over welfare concerns

A member of staff reporting back to a meeting in Weymouth SEA LIFE centre had visited Birmingham SEA LIFE centre and was "disgusted by the condition that the areas and tanks were kept in so all deliveries of livestock were cancelled until they 'got their act together'". SEA LIFE Birmingham refers to itself as the "National SEA LIFE Centre" – the self-styled flagship of the brand. The insider left employment shortly afterwards and so could not confirm if the internal sanctions have now been lifted.



INSIDER ACCOUNT #7:

Confidentiality agreements

All volunteers and staff are made to sign confidentiality agreements. When an insider asked a senior manager why such an agreement was required, the manager said that unexpected deaths occur and situations arise which need to be kept behind closed doors so all staff and volunteers must sign an agreement.



INSIDER ACCOUNT #8:

Penguin welfare at SEA LIFE Birmingham

A member of staff reported that penguins at Birmingham SEA LIFE showed signs of stereotypic behaviours.



Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/pinatostinkieb>

INSIDER ACCOUNT #9:

Shark deaths at SEA LIFE Birmingham

An insider told CAPS:

"The sharks were brought into the centre as small juveniles about three years ago. They are very active and grow quickly, reaching up to 3.5 metres in length. At the time of death, the shark was about 2.5 metres. Before the sharks arrived, some staff expressed concerns that the tank was too small for such a large/active species. Unfortunately they were overruled and the introduction went ahead".

"One of two scalloped hammerhead sharks died after a period of gradually declining health. For some time, the shark had been repeatedly bumping into the rockwork and sides of the tank, with the result that its body was covered in sores and scratches. However, no attempt was made to catch the animal and move it to a larger aquarium. The other shark will also probably die soon as it is a sociable species and does not like to be on its own".



INSIDER ACCOUNT #10:

Gentoo penguin death at SEA LIFE Birmingham

The Gentoo penguin enclosure, which opened in March 2014, is of concern. The enclosure originally housed 12 penguins but a few weeks after opening, one of the penguins swam into one of the underwater viewing panels and died instantly. The death was allegedly hushed up and it is not clear whether it was reported to the relevant authorities.



INSIDER ACCOUNT #11:

£8,000 for one delivery of wild-caught animals



An insider reported that an invoice for just one weekly delivery of fish taken directly from their natural home in the Great Barrier Reef showed SEA LIFE aquariums paying upwards of £8,000 for the animals. It is unknown if this amount of money is spent on fish on a weekly basis as no other invoices could be accessed by the member of staff. If this is the price of a standard delivery, it means that the company may be paying around £400,000 to just one supplier each year to take fish from the ocean. The company is reported to have a number of different fish (and other animal) suppliers. SEA LIFE has, to date, refused to reveal how many animals it takes from the wild and CAPS would welcome clarification in light of this new information.

SEA LIFE visitors are likely unaware that their entrance fee goes towards funding the removal of animals from their wild homes; particularly as SEA LIFE claims to be working to protect the self-same species in the wild.

The tip of the iceberg?

In addition to these specific concerns, staff contacted CAPS to highlight premature deaths of animals due to alleged staff negligence, animals being neglected, concerns over interaction with animals at the "touch pools" and accounts of species being housed together inappropriately, leading to some animals being attacked by others.

We need your help to end the silent suffering

The original SEA LIES investigation uncovered numerous disturbing truths about the operation of the world's largest aquarium brand, SEA LIFE aquariums. Now, these new accounts provided by staff, volunteers and other insiders give just a hint of what other worrying practices might be going on behind closed doors at the company which claims that "everything [it does] is about celebrating the sea and its inhabitants".

With animals stolen from their wild homes, others allegedly left to die due to staff negligence and others showing signs of serious mental distress, we believe that this company must be held to account.

What is clear is that, in visiting a SEA LIFE aquarium, visitors are unwittingly fuelling the continuation of the business model which appears to put profit before the most basic needs of some of the animals. Please, do not visit this or any other business which holds animals captive for profit.

We would like to encourage others to come forward and tell us about their experiences in working or volunteering at SEA LIFE aquariums. Accounts are treated confidentially and your testimony could make an important contribution to the increasing public awareness surrounding this commercial venture which imprisons thousands of animals for their lifetimes.

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