



SEA LIES

An investigation into the UK's largest public aquarium chain

Summary Report



CAPS
Captive Animals' Protection Society

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Introduction

In the second half of 2013, UK-based animal protection charity, the Captive Animals' Protection Society (CAPS), commissioned a detailed investigation into the operation of the UK's largest chain of aquariums, Sea Life; a brand owned by the global company, Merlin Entertainments. This report summarises some of the main findings of that investigation.

The investigation follows a similar project carried out by the same organisation ten years previously which culminated in the report, *Suffering Deep Down*. The 2004 study considered a number of different aquariums, not just those operated by Merlin under the Sea Life brand. As such, a direct comparison cannot be drawn between the results found in 2004 and those found a decade later. However, as Sea Life describes itself as the "world's largest aquarium brand", it is perhaps safe to assume that standards might be found to be higher in Sea Life centres than others. As such, problems or concerns raised with regard to Sea Life aquariums may also be applicable to other public aquariums around the UK.

Despite the inability to draw direct comparisons between the two studies, a number of areas of general concern noted in 2004 were found to be of equal concern today. In particular, that animals are still being taken from the wild to stock aquariums, that animal welfare provision was lacking and that a generally poor standard of educational information was provided to visitors were all practices noted by investigators in both studies, ten years apart. In addition, a number of issues specific to Sea Life have been highlighted by this new investigation including those surrounding conservation claims, rescue and release programmes, the keeping of cetaceans (whales and dolphins) in captivity and the provision of false and misleading information to visitors.

This report seeks to summarise the main themes identified during the study. It does not seek to represent detailed data or methodology but aims offer the reader an overview of the issues identified and provide broad conclusions. For detailed information relating to the data from the main study, and the methodology employed, the study report can be found at www.sea-lies.org.uk or a copy can be provided on request to info@captiveanimals.org.

This summary report offers a sobering view of a company which, it becomes apparent, has little to do with conservation and, it seems, much more to do with profit.



THE CLAIM: "We never get any animal - from the shrimps to the sharks - never get any animal from the sea because we find it cruel. It's part of our company policy not to"
[Sea Life staff member]

THE TRUTH: Sea Life centres take animals from the wild to stock their tanks but senior management refuse to reveal how many of the thousands of fish and other animals have been taken from the sea.

THE CLAIM: Giant crabs and 20 turtles were "rescued" by Sea Life

THE TRUTH: Sea Life bought crabs directly from fisherman for thousands of pounds at a time and 20 turtles were acquired from a turtle farm in the Cayman Islands in 2006. The turtles were acquired despite opposition from conservation organisations which said the import of the animals breached international rules on trade in endangered species.



THE CLAIM: "Sea Life believes it is wrong to keep whales and dolphins in captivity. No matter how spacious, no captive facility can ever provide such far-ranging, highly social and highly intelligent animals with the stimulation they need for a good quality of life".
[Sea Life website]

THE TRUTH: Sea Life's parent company has, since 2006, purchased at least three attractions which housed captive cetaceans. The most recent purchase in 2012 was Chang Feng Ocean World in Shanghai which has been rebranded as a Sea Life centre. Beluga whales were still "performing" in the Shanghai centre in March 2014. Merlin is part-owned by the same company which bought the notorious Sea World marine parks in the US in 2009.

THE CLAIM: "Many of our creatures are on the endangered list"
[Sea Life Website]

THE TRUTH: Only 2.5% of the exhibits observed housed animals belonging to endangered species. The vast majority of species housed in Sea Life aquariums have not been assessed for conservation purposes.

THE CLAIM: "Naturally, we choose only those species that flourish in aquarium surroundings"
[Sea Life website]

THE TRUTH: Various incidences of captivity-related stress behaviours were recognised during the study as well as recurring health issues which, staff admitted, had resulted in high numbers of deaths.



Figure 1: The permanent home of an octopus at a Sea Life centre. Can any animal "flourish" in this tiny glass box?.

"Sea Life claims to be opposed to whales and dolphins in captivity. Yet whales perform circus-style tricks three times a day in the company's Shanghai centre."

THE CLAIM: "Sea Life never kills a healthy animal" [Sea Life staff member, Hunstanton] and "We never put anything to sleep because we have got too many of them or because they are a problem"
[Sea Life staff member, Great Yarmouth]

THE TRUTH: Killing healthy animals because they are "surplus to requirements" or "too large to house" is permitted in Sea Life aquariums but must be discussed by the company's ethics committee. No information has been made available as to how many animals are killed for these reasons.

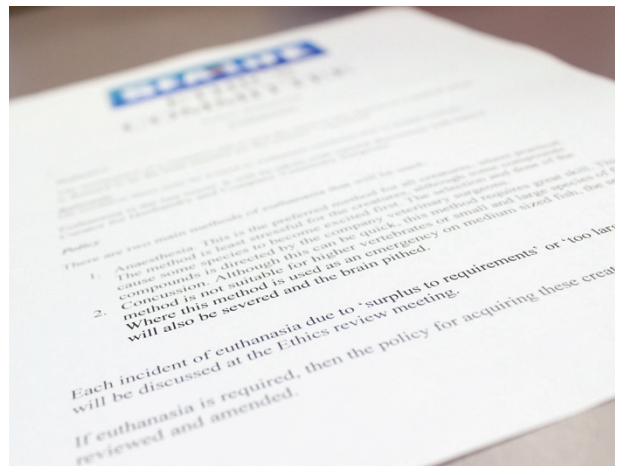


Figure 2: Sea Life's euthanasia policy clearly lists "surplus to requirements" or "too large for tank" as a reason that healthy animals might be killed. Staff denied this to the CAPS researcher.

THE CLAIM: "Breeding programmes help us to reinstate struggling species to environments they help to maintain"
[Sea Life website]

THE TRUTH: Evidence of release of species bred in Sea Life centres is notably absent, with the exception of lobsters (who, in any case, are released to "sustainable fisheries"). Sea Life confirms in published information that breeding programmes serve the purpose of ensuring that Sea Life aquariums remain stocked to avoid having to take animals from the wild.

Figure 3: Some Sea Life staff insisted that no animals were taken from the wild. This is simply not true.



Taken from the ocean and put into a fish tank

Whilst most zoos have moved away from taking animals from the wild to stock their cages, and most members of the public assume that animals held in zoos will have been bred in captivity, for aquariums, this is certainly not the case. In 2004, it was found that a huge 79% of animals held in public aquariums had been taken directly from their ocean home to live in tanks and the current study found little evidence to suggest that things have changed. What has changed however, perhaps as a result of the public backlash as it was revealed that aquariums were removing animals from the wild, is that Sea Life staff are noticeably reluctant to share the truth about the animals' origin with visitors. When asked outright how many animals came from the wild, some staff refused to answer and others claimed they did not know. One member of staff informed our investigator that it was company policy never to take an animal from the wild. This is simply not true.

At five of the 12 centres, when asked, staff denied that any animals were taken from the wild. At the remaining seven, it was admitted that some animals were wild-caught with the implication that this was only the case on rare occasions. This reluctance to be honest about the source of the animals mirrors the response of one of Sea Life's most senior managers, who refused to answer the same question when asked during a meeting with CAPS' director during 2013 and, instead, promised to provide an answer in writing. The answer was never provided and the true figure remains unknown today.

At least one member of staff was honest about the reason for withholding the information. He told the CAPS investigator to contact head office for Sea Life's policy on wild capture as it was a "sensitive subject" and "some people get quite irate about it". There appears to be a clear consensus, from the most senior management to the staff interacting daily with visitors, that the taking of animals from

the wild to stock Sea Life aquariums should be played down as much as possible, or even denied outright.

Despite denials, the CAPS investigator was able to confirm that sharks, fish, crabs, octopuses and turtles, amongst others, had been taken from their wild home to live in Sea Life tanks.

Commercial trade in wildlife dressed up in claims of "rescue"

Whilst the origin of many animals that end up in Sea Life tanks is a secret kept closely guarded by the company, the arrival of others from their ocean home are subject to a great deal of publicity; particularly those that can be seen to bolster Sea Life's reputation for wildlife rescue.

Sea Life claims that its work has a strong focus on the rescue of animals. Indeed, the Sea Life brand owns two seal sanctuaries in Gweek (Cornwall) and Oban (Scotland) which do carry out valuable rescue projects. Conversely, many of the highly publicised "rescues" carried out by the company have, in fact,

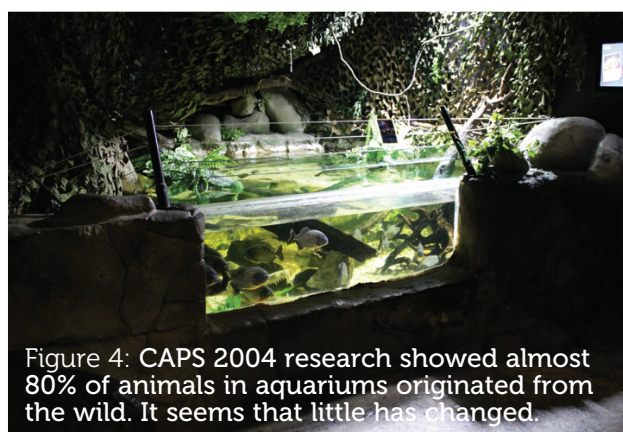


Figure 4: CAPS 2004 research showed almost 80% of animals in aquariums originated from the wild. It seems that little has changed.

Figure 5: Giant crabs were bought from fishermen and sent to live in tanks in UK aquariums.



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transpired to be commercial transactions where animals appear to have been purchased by Sea Life in order for them to spend their lives in a tank.

For example, in March 2013, a nine-foot Japanese spider crab was, according to Sea Life, “rescued from being on Japanese dinner plates”^{vi}. In fact, Sea Life had purchased the animal from a fisherman. The purchase of the male crab appeared to be particularly well-timed as, at that time, the aquarium also held a female of the same species that required a male to fertilise her eggs.

This follows a similar transaction in 2012, when three Tasmanian king crabs were “rescued from fisherman” off the coast of Tasmania. Sea Life “saved them from death” by buying them from the fishermen for £3,000^{vi}. It appears that the practice of buying animals from those people removing them from their natural habitat and then characterising that transaction as a rescue is a way in which Sea Life generates positive publicity about its work.

A similar situation occurred when 20 turtles were reportedly “rescued” from a turtle farm in the Cayman Islands; one of whom is likely to be ‘Ernie’, the Green sea turtle at Manchester Sea Life. At the time the proposal to acquire the turtles was made, it was met with opposition by leading conservation organisations who maintained that the move would contravene rules on the trade in endangered species^{vii}. It appears that despite this strong opposition, Sea Life went ahead and imported the 20 turtles from the Cayman Islands farm with permission from UK authorities. No published information is available to confirm whether or not money changed hands in the transaction but given that the turtle farm is a for-profit business, it seems

Figure 6: Turtles were imported from a farm on the Cayman Islands to Sea Life centres in the UK, despite allegations by leading conservationists that the import was illegal.



© Animals Asia Foundation

reasonable to assume that this was a commercial transaction.

According to both national media and Sea Life staff, the removal of ‘Ernie’ from the farm for exhibit was another “rescue”^{viii}. However, as in the case of Sea Life’s acquisition of the giant crabs, the acquisition of the turtles from a company which breeds them for sale can hardly be characterised as a rescue. Furthermore, these types of practices unarguably fuels the trade in wildlife, as demand is met by those willing to supply animals to those seeking them out.

Finally, some of the other turtles in Sea Life centres have reportedly been rescued by the company after being injured by speedboats. Whilst caring for injured wildlife appears to offer legitimate cause for rescue, the CAPS investigator was informed that the turtles had been flown in from Florida in order

to live in Sea Life tanks in the UK. Given the known threats to animal health and welfare during travel, transporting injured wildlife over 4,000 miles suggests that the “rescue” of these animals was not carried out with the individuals’ welfare in mind.

Furthermore, included in the list of charitable organisations that Sea Life claims to support is “Florida Sea Turtle Rescue”. An internet search showed no organisation currently operating under this name but its inclusion in Sea Life’s list of beneficiaries suggests that the aquarium chain has or has had active links with an organisation focused upon turtle rescue in the very place from which they originate. This raises further concerns over the company’s decision to transport the allegedly injured animals to the UK.

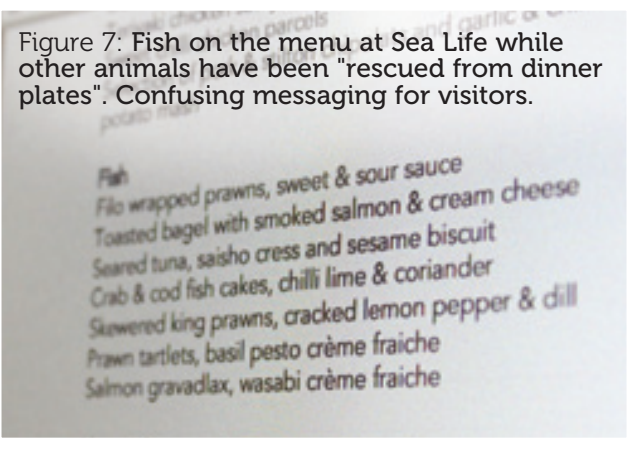
“Saving animals from the dinner plate” ... and serving others to visitors

Many people associate zoos and aquariums with the protection of species and believe that their ultimate aim is to release animals back to the wild. Whilst release to the wild very rarely happens in zoos and, indeed, it has been shown that aquariums are still taking animals from the sea to stock their tanks, CAPS’ investigator was told that there are some release programmes in operation at Sea Life centres. In particular the lobsters, it was stated by a member of staff at the Hunstanton centre, are part of a release programme with 20-30 being freed every few months. However when questioned further, it was confirmed that the animals were released as part of a “sustainable fishery”. In other words, they were released with a view to end up as food. Sea Life state that this “helps both lobster conservation and the food industry”.

On the one hand, Sea Life tells its visitors that it has saved some animals, such as giant crabs, from death on people’s dinner plates, whilst knowingly sending others to suffer the same fate. This can hardly fail to present a confusing and contradictory message to visitors.

This confused messaging involving claims of saving animals from being eaten whilst sending other animals to be eaten is further compounded by the serving of fish in the aquarium restaurants. Fish available at Sea Life events includes cod; a species which, until recently, was recommended by experts for inclusion on the endangered species list.

Figure 7: Fish on the menu at Sea Life while other animals have been “rescued from dinner plates”. Confusing messaging for visitors.



Fish
Filo wrapped prawns, sweet & sour sauce
Toasted bagel with smoked salmon & cream cheese
Seared tuna, saiso cress and sesame biscuit
Crab & cod fish cakes, chilli lime & coriander
Skewered king prawns, cracked lemon pepper & dill
Prawn tartlets, basil pesto crème fraîche
Salmon gravadlax, wasabi crème fraîche

Perhaps more importantly, from an ethical perspective, it is difficult to encourage visitors, and particularly young people, to develop empathy and respect for animals that they are seeing in aquariums if those same animals are later presented to them as food. The overriding message is not that oceans and marine life should be conserved because the lives of those animals and the habitats in which they live are valuable in their own right, but that conservation of these species is necessary in order to ensure an endless supply of food for people.

In truth, marine animal species and habitats are suffering catastrophic degradation as the result of fishing for human consumption. The most important message that Sea Life could pass on to its visitors is to refrain from eating fish, and thus supporting destructive industries (either directly or indirectly) altogether. Of course, whilst Sea Life buys animals from fishermen, takes animals from the wild itself, and serves fish up to visitors in its restaurants, delivering this simple conservation message becomes impossible without condemning its own practices.

Conservation claims that do not stand up to scrutiny

In addition to other claims, Sea Life asserts that marine conservation is at the heart of its work. Whilst it is accepted that effective conservation cannot be measured in monetary terms, the amount of money that conservation organisations donate to worthy projects has long been used as a benchmark to establish who the main contributors are. Given that Sea Life advertises itself as the world’s largest aquarium brand and has over 10 million visitors per year, one might expect the conservation contribution of the organisation to be significant.

Merlin, the parent organisation of Sea Life, reported revenue of over £1 billion (£1,074,000,000) in 2012⁶. Despite this, when questioned specifically on monetary contribution to conservation efforts, a senior manager from Sea Life was only able to offer concrete evidence of £250,000 donated to a turtle sanctuary in Greece. This amounts to just 0.02% of Merlin’s total revenue and less than three pence per person being able to be traced directly to *in situ* conservation. It was noticed by the CAPS investigator that there were donation collection points asking for money from Sea Life visitors for the turtle sanctuary in each of its centres. As such, it is not clear whether or not Sea Life donates any of its own takings to the initiative or simply the money that its customers give over and above their entrance fee (currently around £65 per family group, dependent on location).

According to signage at Brighton Sea Life centre, almost £1,000 has been raised for the charity, Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC), and £10,000 for the Greek turtle sanctuary. It is unclear whether this £10,000 is part of, or in addition to, the £250,000 already disclosed.

Amongst its conservation claims, the company cites sea horse breeding as one of its major activities. Most zoos claim that breeding of animals is carried out in order to provide a “safety net” population for eventual reintroduction to the wild and Sea Life does state that if sea horses become extinct, the

Figures 8 & 9: Staff told the CAPS investigator that animals are kept at Sea Life based on which species visitors wanted to see, rather than for conservation purposes.



animals include clown fish and regal tangs which were made famous by the film, *Finding Nemo*. Choosing species based on the popularity of characters in animated movies suggests that conservation is not a primary consideration for which animals might be held captive in Sea Life aquariums.

If Sea Life is not offering significant support to *in situ* conservation (despite its huge income) nor caring for many endangered species, there seems to be little meaningful conservation contribution being made by the business. Of course, while Sea Life continues to take animals from the wild, rather than making a positive impact on conservation, Sea Life rather appears to be part of the problem.

animals bred in their aquariums could be released. The company is, however, honest in admitting that the foremost purpose of breeding sea horses is to stock its own tanks which, it is stated, reduces the need to take animals from the sea. Of course most conservation organisations do not, themselves, pose a direct threat to wild species and so to claim that not removing animals from their natural habitat is active conservation work is somewhat misleading.

Notwithstanding the capture of animals from the wild, the vast majority of species held by Sea Life centres belong to species either not threatened in the wild, or species that have not been assessed for conservation purposes. Just 2.5% of exhibits house species which are classed as endangered.

According to a member of staff at the Hunstanton centre "Sea Life has standard stock ... they are all key creatures that people want to see". These

Animal welfare worries

It was once thought that fish lacked intelligence and sentience but, for a number of years, it has been recognised that this is not the case. The myth that fish have three-second memories has long been dispelled by clear scientific evidence, and yet fish are still treated as little more than ornaments rather than the sentient animals that they are. Fish and other aquatic animals have physical, social, behavioural and environmental needs which must be met in order for them to experience a good quality of life. Sea Life makes the claim that it only keeps animals that "flourish" in an aquarium environment, but in many cases this claim does not appear to be borne out in evidence.

The CAPS investigator found evidence of stress-related disease, high mortality and repetitive

behaviours indicative of an inability to cope with captive situations in the centres visited.

A clear case of neglect was described by a member of Sea Life staff during the investigation. At Oban Sea Life, an apparently knowledgeable member of staff allegedly voiced concerns to senior management regarding signs that the Shore crabs were infected with a dangerous parasite (*Sacculina carcini*). The CAPS investigator was told that concerns were ignored for several weeks by the Animal Care team and eventually the crabs were deemed too sick to be on display and were killed. The animals were allegedly killed by a senior member of staff by placing them into a box filled with an (unknown) toxic substance. The animals apparently took 30 minutes to die.

In 2007, Sea Life staff negligence was responsible for the deaths of three Blacktip reef sharks who were being transported 70 miles between Great Yarmouth Sea Life and a refurbished tank at Hunstanton. It was reported that the three died because their water was too cold^{vi}. According to a news report, the company confirmed that, due to a mistake made by a staff member, the water was two degrees centigrade below the minimum required for sharks.

When specifically asked about how the welfare of the animals was monitored and assessed, answers from staff were vague. One member of staff said that the welfare of the turtles was decided based on whether they were “feeding and swimming” along with “a general sort of looking over the body”. The Animal Care member of staff added “I mean if he’s swimming around he’s pretty happy

then that’s probably a good indicator” and “if they stop eating they are not happy”.

Staff at Great Yarmouth Sea Life informed the CAPS investigator that successful breeding is a positive indicator of welfare. Yet it has been demonstrated that breeding when considered as a stand-alone criterion cannot be considered a viable indicator of good welfare^{vii}. Even if it were, Sea Life itself admits that many of the species in its care are not breeding in their centres. Indeed, the fact that marine fish do not breed well in captivity is the very reason that these animals are taken from the sea. By the company’s own welfare indicators, therefore, it seems that the needs of many of the animals are unlikely to be being met in full.

Welfare concerns with regard to provision of a suitable environment included lack of an appropriate substrate (particularly for fish and other animals that spend time buried in the sea bed), lack of space to leave the water (in the case of turtles and alligators), lack of space to swim (in the case of alligators), no access to outdoors whatsoever (in the case of penguins and reptiles), lack of environmental enrichment (for many species), lack of space to retreat from view (for many species), lack of space to retreat from other animals (for many species) and nocturnal and diurnal species being housed together and thus being subjected to each others’ light cycle, amongst other things.

Staff at Scarborough Sea Life admitted: “White spot [a parasite] is quite common, especially in blue [Regal] tangs as they get a bit stressed with a lack of space” and that the animals may “feel claustrophobic” in their tanks. Staff at Sea Life aquariums mentioned white spot as if it was intrinsic with aquariums but it is, in fact, as confirmed by staff at the Scarborough centre, “very easy to treat”. Despite this, at Blackpool it was admitted that “obviously we get white spot from time-to-time, which has meant high mortality in those tanks”. As white spot can, by the company’s own admission, be treated, it is unclear how high mortality in tanks in Blackpool was allowed to occur.

Some large fish were housed in cylindrical tanks which were barely longer than their own body length. One large arowana was unable to swim more than one body length. Other large fish that are naturally social and construct nests in the wild were housed alone in barren tanks not much larger than their own body length. These tanks also lacked enrichment which meant the fish were

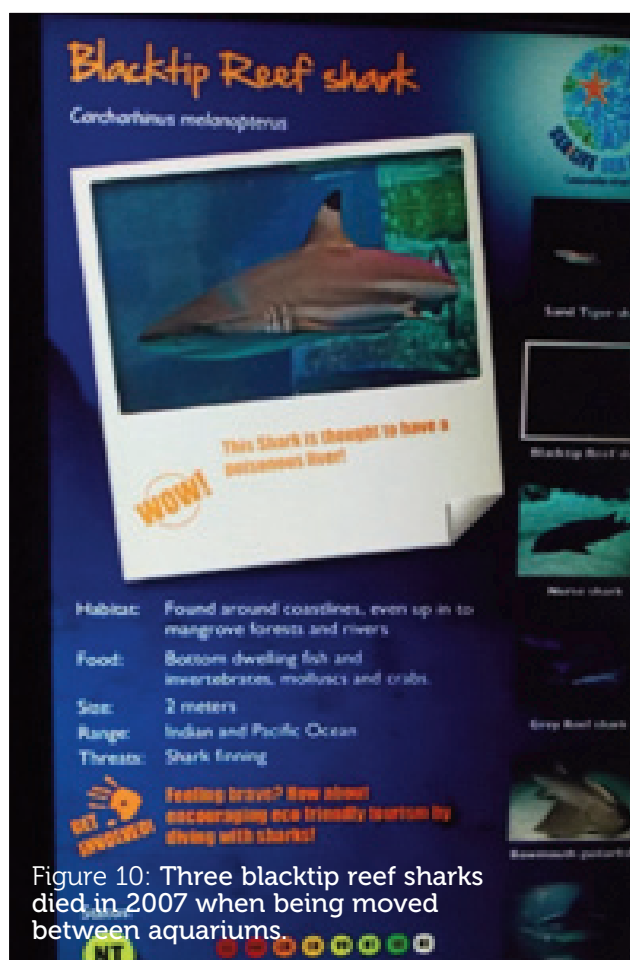


Figure 10: Three blacktip reef sharks died in 2007 when being moved between aquariums.

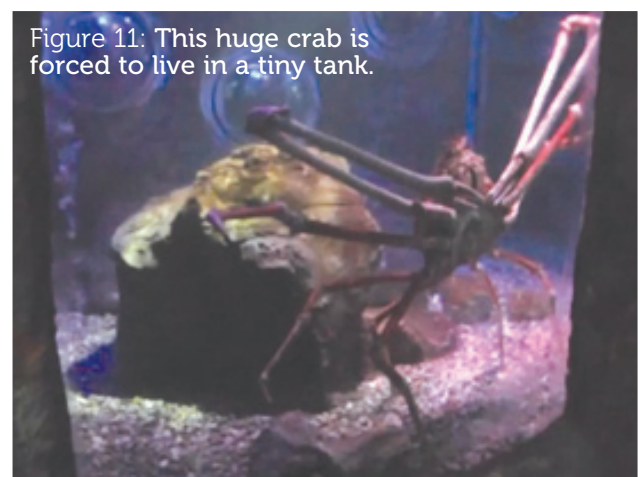
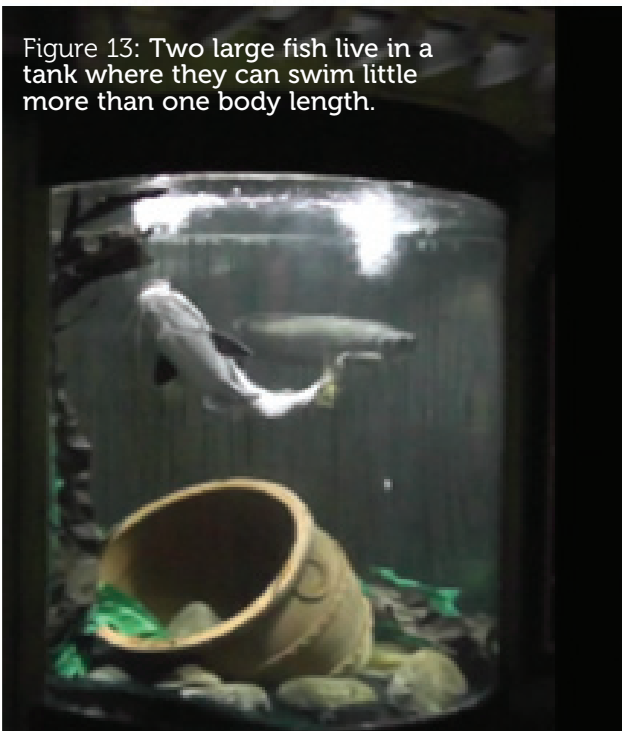


Figure 11: This huge crab is forced to live in a tiny tank.

Figure 12: This crocodile lives with no natural light, enough water to submerge but no space to swim. Nowhere to hide from the gaze and flash photography of visitors.



Figure 13: Two large fish live in a tank where they can swim little more than one body length.



denied the ability to carry out even the bare minimum of their natural behaviours.

Abnormal behaviour such as pacing and surface breaking behaviour (SBB) was documented in various sites but was often dismissed by staff. Staff at different centres gave differing reasons for surface breaking behaviour in ray species, including

that the rays were greedy (and thus constantly looking for food), that they were "dancing", "excited", "friendly", "coming up for oxygen" or that they were trying to "read visitor's heartbeats". Perhaps the most bizarre suggestion was that the persistent surface breaking behaviour demonstrated by a dog fish was the fish coming to the surface to "smell the air". These responses either show a serious lack of understanding on the part of the staff entrusted with educating aquarium visitors or deliberate attempts to cover up undesirable behaviours in the animals, which are likely caused by captivity related stress.

Naturally migratory sharks live in small pools in Sea Life centres. At the Manchester centre, visitors can pay to enter the tanks with them as part of the company's "Sea Trek" experience. This close encounter experience is offered despite a shark dying from a haemorrhage thought to have been caused by stress when a person entered the tank at Brighton Sea Life in 2003. Staff at the time were quoted in press as saying that an unfamiliar person swimming around would have caused a lot of stress^{viii}.

Other "close encounters" were offered to visitors where they could stroke a starfish or pick up a crab. Starfish were kept in tubs of water, not much larger than their own bodies, in shallow rock pool exhibits. When asked why the animals were kept in tubs, a member of staff told the CAPS investigator that it was so they could be easily removed for people to be able to touch them. The starfish were rotated on a two hourly basis.

Crabs were taken directly out of the pool and shown to visitors. One member of staff turned one crab upside down in order to make the animal



Figure 14: People are encouraged to touch the animals.

“play dead” whilst explaining that the crab was tame, like a cat or a dog. This “playing dead” was, in fact, likely a stress or fear response by the animal to being removed abruptly from the water. Some crab species feign death when disturbed by a predator. Deliberately eliciting this response for entertainment of visitors is, at best, irresponsible and, at worst, cruel. One staff put the situation quite bluntly, stating: “to be fair, with the crabs, their job is to be picked up and poked in the head”.

Sea Life’s cetacean hypocrisy

Sea Life states on its website: “Sea Life believes it is wrong to keep whales and dolphins in captivity. No matter how spacious, no captive facility can ever provide such far-ranging, highly social and highly intelligent animals with the stimulation they need for a good quality of life.”

Sea Life’s apparent concern over cetacean captivity led to its public opposition to a permit application made by a consortium of US-based aquariums to import beluga whales from the wild in order to populate their attractions. Sea Life joined whale and dolphin conservation groups in a call to the US Federal Government to refuse the application. On 6th August 2013, the application was denied and the move was celebrated as a victory amongst animal protection advocates.

At the same time that the application was being considered by the US government, three beluga whales were performing tricks for audiences alongside sea lions in the Chang Feng Ocean World aquarium in Shanghai. The beluga whale show was

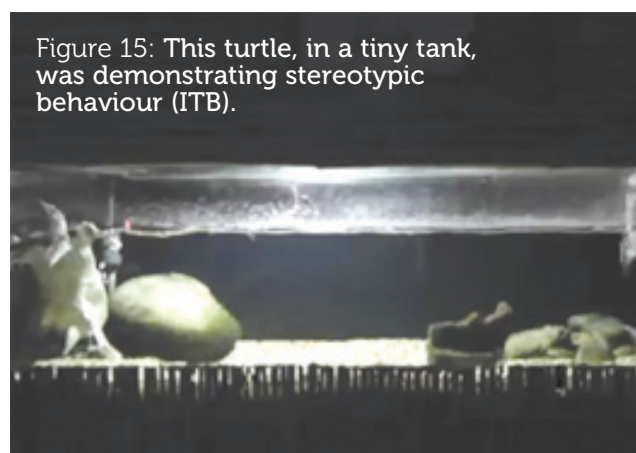


Figure 15: This turtle, in a tiny tank, was demonstrating stereotypic behaviour (ITB).

reportedly part of a new programme developed for 2013 and an investigator confirmed that the whale show was ongoing in early 2014. The Chang Feng aquarium is owned by Merlin Entertainments and operates under the Sea Life brand.

The site was bought in 2012 by Merlin and an interview with a senior manager in press in October 2012 queried the company’s stance on captive cetaceans; specifically drawing attention to the stated policy against keeping whales and dolphins which appeared to conflict with the keeping of beluga whales in Shanghai.

The spokesperson suggested that the policy in practice was more flexible than the firm statements on the company’s website might suggest, saying: “we understand that [opposition to keeping cetaceans in captivity] is not the view in all cultures,



and given Merlin's fast growth, we have at times acquired businesses which historically have included shows or displays which involve these creatures. This has never been a reason not to take on a good business^{ix}.

He went on to say that: "In the short term, we will for example completely cease or review 'shows' involving such creatures". However, almost two years after Merlin purchased the Shanghai aquarium, the whales continue to perform daily, with no sign that the company has attempted to bring the spectacle to an end. Beluga whale toys fill the gift shop and even the Shanghai Sea Life centre's logo is a Beluga whale. In addition, sea lions perform at the aquarium in the type of circus-style show that will be banned in the UK in the coming years. There is no mention whatsoever of the Beluga whales on any Merlin or Sea Life websites and a weblink included on the Merlin website under the Chang Feng Ocean World name links to another aquarium's website; one which is not owned by Merlin.

The Shanghai aquarium is not the first Merlin business to house captive cetaceans as, in November 2006, Merlin announced its acquisition of the Italian theme park 'Gardaland' which operated one of Europe's largest captive dolphin shows and housed six dolphins at the time: Nau, Ted, Betty, Robin, Tango and Mia. Betty and Robin had been captured from the wild in the 1980s. Tango died in 2008, whilst under Merlin's care.

Upon discovery of the acquisition of this first park, UK based charity, Marine Connection, working for the protection and welfare of dolphins and whales worldwide, immediately raised concerns. Merlin responded stating that the welfare of dolphins at Gardaland would be the "overriding consideration governing all decisions on their behalf"^x.

Following the acquisition of Gardaland, in 2007 Merlin Entertainments went on to acquire the Tussauds Group whose facilities include Heide Park in Germany; another park which featured a dolphin

pool with at least one dolphin housed there at the time of acquisition.

In response to criticism over its apparently contradictory stance on cetacean captivity, Merlin released a statement in 2012 claiming that the company was planning to create a sanctuary for the Gardaland and Heide Park dolphins^{xi}. However the Heide Park dolphins had already been transferred to Nuremberg Zoo by Merlin in 2008 and the Gardaland dolphins were sent to Genoa Aquarium in 2013. It is unclear whether or not Merlin retain ownership of the animals. At present, all continue to be on public display (including ongoing dolphin shows at Nuremberg) and no evidence of a sanctuary being developed is available in the public domain in March 2014. This is in spite of repeated references to the sanctuary plans made in press statements by Merlin. CAPS contacted Merlin in March 2014 to request information on the progress of the proposed sanctuary but no response was received.

Additionally, a major stakeholder in Merlin Entertainments is the Blackstone Group, which also holds a 25% share in the notorious Sea World marine parks. Sea World has come under increasing criticism for its use of performing Orcas. This criticism reached new levels with the 2013 release of the damning documentary, *Blackfish*, which highlighted the serious welfare and safety concerns surrounding the capture of cetaceans from the wild as well as their wellbeing in captivity.

Clearly, while whales continue to perform tricks daily in the Shanghai Sea Life centre, and dolphins previously under Merlin's care are simply sent to another location where they continue to be used for entertainment, any claims that the company is opposed to cetacean captivity is demonstrably false. This means that visitors to Sea Life centres in the UK and the rest of Europe may be unwittingly supporting the exploitation of these animals.



Figures 16: Sea Life centre in Shanghai advertises daily whale shows, despite Sea Life's proclaimed opposition to cetacean captivity.

Conclusion

The Sea Life brand is part of a huge and ever-expanding commercial business with an increasing influence around the world. This study strongly suggests that Sea Life aquariums are not benign institutions with the best interests of animals in mind but businesses adept at attracting positive publicity from sometimes questionable activities, whilst actively avoiding areas of controversy. The pursuit of positive publicity continues even if it means being somewhat economical with the truth. In some cases, simple questions to staff are met with outright lies when it was deemed the true answer might not be one which Sea Life visitors might expect to hear.

Given the evidence of removing animals from the wild, welfare concerns, poor education and contradictory messaging to its visitors, the prospect of Sea Life's increasing global influence should not just be a concern for animal protection advocates, but for all of us.

Healthy oceans are vital for a healthy planet and Sea Life, whose mission appears to be focused not upon the protection of such habitats, but upon the furtherance of its own business brand and expanding empire, should not, in our opinion, be trusted as a reliable ambassador of these precious and threatened environments.

The ethical and animal welfare concerns surrounding the zoo industry are being brought under increasing scrutiny worldwide but fish and other marine animals are often overlooked. This is perhaps because it is easier for us to empathise with the plight of mammals, who are more like us and share so many of our own traits. Since *Suffering Deep Down* was published by CAPS in 2004, many myths surrounding aquatic animals have been dispelled. Fish have lives of their own. They suffer and experience pain. They learn and choose to avoid situations which put them under threat of harm. It is time that we gave fish and other aquatic animals our full consideration; and that can begin by bringing an end to support for their lifelong confinement in public aquariums.

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