



Dolphin Assisted Therapy and Swimming With Dolphins - questionable undertakings

First of all, we would like to inform those of you who don't already know that the Year of the Dolphin has been extended to 2008. After having accomplished a lot in awareness-raising and education in 2007, the focus in 2008 will be on supporting select conservation projects. But now to the real topic of this newsletter...



What is Dolphin Assisted Therapy?

Dolphin Assisted Therapy, or DAT, is an increasingly popular Animal Assisted Therapy made available through a growing number of programs around the world and marketed as offering a cure or respite from human illness or disability. The increase in popularity of Dolphin Assisted Therapy, and the proliferation of DAT centers, is likely to be a result of both the growing interest in interaction with these popular animals as a means of promoting well-being in humans and the related business potential of DAT. However, there is no scientific proof that DAT is more successful than any other animal assisted therapy or that it is a successful long-term treatment at all. DAT involves two highly vulnerable groups of individuals. The people undergoing the therapy are often children or adults with psychological or physical disabilities and/or emotional problems and the dolphins used in DAT are either confined in captivity or are part of a wild population that may suffer from human disturbance. DAT is a growing industry, and many parents of disabled or developmentally impeded children invest their hopes and money in a dolphin therapy.

Is DAT completely safe?

Dolphins are wild animals and unpredictable, even when well trained. People have suffered bites, bruises, scratches, abrasions and broken bones as a result of swimming with dolphins. Dolphins are large, strong animals and entering the water with them can present a risk to human health and safety. Disease transmission is a serious concern, as dolphins can carry diseases that can be transmittable to humans. Although the dolphins may be screened for disease, there may be no legal requirement to do this and some facilities do not have adequate veterinary or husbandry practices in place.

Can DAT really work?

Proponents of DAT have claimed it can be used to treat a whole range of physical and psychological conditions. But two independent reviews by senior Emory University scholars demonstrate that there is no proven scientific validity to DAT. "Despite DAT's extensive promotion to the general public, the evidence that it produces enduring improvements in the core symptoms of any psychological disorder is nil" They recommend that "Both practitioners of DAT and parents who are considering DAT for their children should be made aware that this treatment has yet to be subject to an adequate empirical test" (Marino & Lilienfeld).

How well regulated is DAT?

We are not aware of any specific regulations governing DAT in the countries where it is conducted. It is therefore not possible for authorities to ensure any health or safety standards in national DAT facilities. Furthermore, DAT providers are not required to have any specific training or certification and there is no legitimate regulatory body for DAT. Consequently, participants and their families and caregivers have limited

opportunity to verify the qualifications, or expertise, of the staff in whose care they place themselves or their loved one. DAT can present a significant risk to the health and welfare of dolphins used in the programs. Their care and conditions may be neither inspected nor regulated.

What are the risks to dolphins?

Dolphins are charismatic animals. Their obvious exuberance and apparent 'playfulness' evoke in us feelings of friendship and empathy. But DAT is not a service concerned with the welfare of dolphins!

Where do the dolphins come from?

Methods used to capture and transport dolphins can be shockingly cruel and many dolphins die in the process. Wild capture may have significant conservation implications and the impact of captures on the long-term survival of dolphin populations is unknown.

What can life be like for a DAT dolphin?

In captivity, dolphins have a lower survival rate than in the wild. The stress of their confinement prevents them from behaving normally – hunting, breeding, socializing, resting – often making them ill and resulting in premature death.

Betsy Smith was a pioneer of Dolphin Assisted Therapy but in 2003 she denounced it publicly, strongly criticizing these activities, stating that "It is a rather cynical and deceptive practice by dolphinarium and swim-with-programs owners. Some certified therapists with no dolphin knowledge will charge exorbitant fees for treatment that can be done without dolphins... At the heart of all these therapy programs is the exploitation of vulnerable people and vulnerable dolphins" (Betsy Smith 2003).

A recent scientific review paper by Lori Marino and Scott Lilienfeld of Emory University in Atlanta, USA, reviews DAT studies and illuminates the tendency of DAT success reports to be based on flawed or not credible "facts". (Marino & Lilienfeld 2007 "Dolphin Assisted Therapy: more flawed data and more flawed conclusions") The content: Dolphin-Assisted Therapy (DAT) is an increasingly popular choice of treatment for illness and developmental disabilities by providing participants with the opportunity to swim or interact with live captive dolphins. Two reviews of DAT (Marino and Lilienfeld [1998] and Humphries [2003]) concluded that there is no credible scientific evidence for the effectiveness of this intervention. This paper offers an update of the methodological status of DAT by reviewing five peer-reviewed DAT studies published in the last eight years. The authors found that all five studies were methodologically flawed and plagued by several threats to both internal and construct validity. They conclude that nearly a decade following their initial review in 1998, there remains no compelling evidence that DAT is a legitimate therapy or that it affords any more than fleeting improvements in mood.

Fundamentally, there remains no conclusive scientific evidence that DAT is more effective than any other animal assisted therapy or is a therapy with any long-term benefit. As Marino and Lilienfeld (2007) point out: "...there is little reason to believe that DAT is a legitimate therapy or that it constitutes much more than entertainment". Moreover, the apparent short-term effects purported to be unique to DAT may also be achieved using other therapies. Growing evidence indicates that there are much cheaper, morally more recommendable and equally effective alternatives to DAT, such as programs involving horses, dogs and other domestic animals.

Humphries (2003) concludes that the available research evidence does not conclusively support the claims that DAT is effective for improving the behaviors of young children with disability and recommends that: "Parents of young children with disabilities and their practitioners should note that the cost of DAT is extremely high (typically \$2600 for five 40-minute sessions) and that currently there is not enough research evidence available to support the use of the practice" (Humphries 2003).

YoD Partner ACCOBAMS (Agreement for the Conservation of Cetaceans in the Black and Mediterranean Sea) has formulated its position on human interaction with wild cetaceans (excerpts):

"Interactions with marine mammals have intensified over the past decade, with a recent and ongoing proliferation of programs aimed to quench our desire to interact with, touch and feed these mammals. Such programs have continued to expand in spite of concerns that they actually may be harming these animals. Swim-with-dolphin programs (SWD) are multiplying worldwide, including in the ACCOBAMS area. Lucrative dive and tourist operations in several countries in the region, including France and likely soon in Italy, tout opportunities to swim with and perhaps feed wild whales, dolphins and other marine life.

The Scientific Committee of ACCOBAMS is aware of a growing body of literature indicating that there are risks associated with human interactions with marine mammals, specifically dolphins, in the wild. ... Samuels et al. (2000) reviewed available data on SWD operations and found that there was a 'clear risk' of harassment to small cetaceans from such operations, as well as a threat to humans. Based on their findings, the US Marine Mammal Commission suggested that regulations be promulgated to specify that "any activity intended to enable in-water interactions between humans and dolphins in the wild constitutes a 'taking' and is prohibited" (NOAA Fisheries 2002).

We are also concerned by evidence that suggests that commercial whale watching and other interactive programs are being rivaled by the public's attempts to interact with cetaceans "privately" through personal watercraft. These activities are harder to monitor and regulate. Activities that promote or enable direct interactions between humans and marine mammals increase the potential for harassment, here defined as was defined as "Disruption of a cetacean's normal behavior or prior activity by deliberate or negligent acts of pursuit, dispersal, herding, interference, torment, tagging, marking, branding or other acts that annoy or trouble cetaceans, as well as attempts and repeated approaches for such purposes".

For this reason, the Scientific Committee of ACCOBAMS does not support commercial swim-with wild cetacean programs in the ACCOBAMS area. Evidence exists that, in some locations, whales or dolphins are harassed and repeatedly disturbed by swim boats that tend to drop swimmers in the water as close as possible to the animals. Research indicates that, in some areas heavily targeted by commercial swim tours and other human activities, dolphins are actually leaving their traditional habitat in favor of less disturbed areas (Forest 2001). There is valid concern that disruption to feeding, resting, nursing and other behavior may have a long-term impact on the health and well-being of individuals and populations. Another consideration is the safety of both swimmers and cetaceans.

In conclusion, the ACCOBAMS Scientific Committee recommends that interacting with wild cetaceans should not be attempted, except for specific listed purposes such as scientific research, education, and responsibly-conducted, controlled whale watching, and viewing cetaceans must be conducted in a manner that does not contribute to the harassment of the mammals. Based on the growing body of scientific evidence that indicates disturbance and harm associated with human interactions with cetaceans in the wild, ACCOBAMS cannot support, condone, approve, or authorize activities that involve closely approaching, interacting with, or attempting to interact with whales, dolphins, or porpoises."

Another relevant piece from the news section of our website:

Statement Concerning the Import Ban for Wild Dolphins to Dominican Republic

Bonn, Dec. 10th, 2007; The Year of the Dolphin (YOD) Partners today wish to express their thanks to Dr. Leonel Antonio Fernandez Reyes, President of the Dominican Republic for the decision of his Government to refuse an import permit for dolphins caught in the Taiji drive fishery of Japan.

In early 2007 it came to the attention of the YOD Partners that there was a proposed export of twelve dolphins captured in a drive hunt in Taiji, Japan to the Ocean World theme park in the Dominican Republic for captive display. The Partners, on examining the evidence, agreed that the capture of live dolphins was subsidizing a hunt in which many thousands of other dolphins were being killed inhumanely and unsustainably to be sold as meat for human consumption. Given the adverse impact that the drive fishery has on dolphin populations, as well as global public concerns about the fishery, they resolved to express their concerns to the Government of the Dominican Republic.

The Partners wrote to Dr. Leonel Antonio Fernandez Reyes on the 1st May 2007 to offer their advice. The YOD Partners respectively stated 'we felt the need to share our concerns with you, in the hope that you and your country would be able to contribute to the Year of the Dolphin campaign by sending an unequivocal and strong signal to the world'.

The YOD partners believe that an important step has been taken for cetacean conservation and wish to publicly commend the stance of the Government of the Dominican Republic. The YOD Partnership respectfully calls for an end to all such exports of animals caught in drive hunts.

Conservation and education are the main focus of the YOD campaign. With a new agreement negotiated during the Western African Talks on Cetaceans and their Habitats (WATCH) in October, the foundation was laid for one of the largest cetacean agreements under the auspices of CMS.

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