



## DOLPHINS IN CAPTIVITY

*This fact sheet provides teachers with the information they need to teach students about the welfare issues associated with dolphin captivity across the world*

**FACT SHEET: DOLPHINS IN CAPTIVITY**

© March 2018

Voiceless  
2 Paddington Street  
Paddington NSW 2021  
T: +612 9357 0723  
[info@voiceless.org.au](mailto:info@voiceless.org.au)

Follow us:



**Voiceless.Institute**



**Voiceless.org.au**



**@VoicelessNews**



**voiceless.org.au**

## ABOUT VOICELESS

Voiceless, the animal protection institute, is an independent non-profit think tank working to promote respect and compassion for animals. By encouraging critical-thinking on animal protection issues and growing the field of animal law, Voiceless is equipping today's youth to become tomorrow's decision-makers.

## CONTACT

If you would like to get in touch with us about this fact sheet or to find out more about our education work, please contact:

[education@voiceless.org.au](mailto:education@voiceless.org.au)

Thank you to Action for  
Dolphins for their assistance

Voiceless is a proud partner  
of the Humane Education Coalition



Disclaimer: Voiceless Limited ACN 108 494 631 ("Voiceless") is a company limited by guarantee. Voiceless is not a legal practice and does not give legal advice to individuals or organisations. While Voiceless has made every effort to ensure the accuracy of information, including images, presented in this publication, Voiceless does not guarantee the accuracy or completeness of that information. Information is provided by Voiceless as general information only and any use of or reliance on it should only be undertaken on a strictly voluntary basis after an independent review by a qualified legal practitioner (or other expert). Voiceless is not responsible for, and disclaims all liability for, any loss or damage arising out of the use of or reliance on this publication. This publication is protected by copyright and no part of it should be reproduced in any form without the consent of Voiceless.

© March 2018



# WHAT ARE DOLPHINS?

Dolphins are marine mammals, who belong to the Order Cetacea known as 'cetaceans'. Dolphins are highly social and intelligent marine mammals.

They have complex systems of communication, utilising a variety of sounds to communicate with members of their pods.

To navigate through their ocean environment and find food, they cleverly use sound waves in a process known as echolocation. This essentially means that they are able to use sound to 'see'.

Within their social groups, dolphins have strong relationships. They have friends, and just like humans can remember when somebody owes them a favour.<sup>ii</sup>

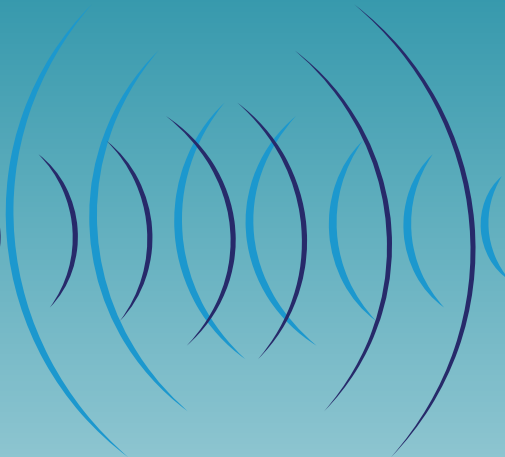
They can even remember a fellow dolphin they met up to 20 years ago.<sup>iii</sup>

**Female dolphins support each other when they raise their young, often forming 'maternity pods' and acting as 'aunties' for each other's calves.<sup>iv</sup>**

Using their advanced cognitive ability, they are able to use tools and engage in problem-solving behaviour.<sup>v</sup> For example, some dolphins have been observed covering their beaks with sponges, to protect themselves from urchin spines while foraging for food.<sup>vi</sup>

## How does echolocation work?

The sound bounces off the fish and travels back to the dolphins ear, creating a 'picture'.



The dolphin makes a clicking sound which travels through the water



**"The high resolution of dolphin echolocation is difficult for humans to comprehend: imagine being able to use sound to detect an object approximately the size of a Ping-Pong ball a football field away!"<sup>i</sup>**

# ARE CAPTIVE DOLPHINS BRED IN CAPTIVITY OR CAPTURED IN THE WILD?

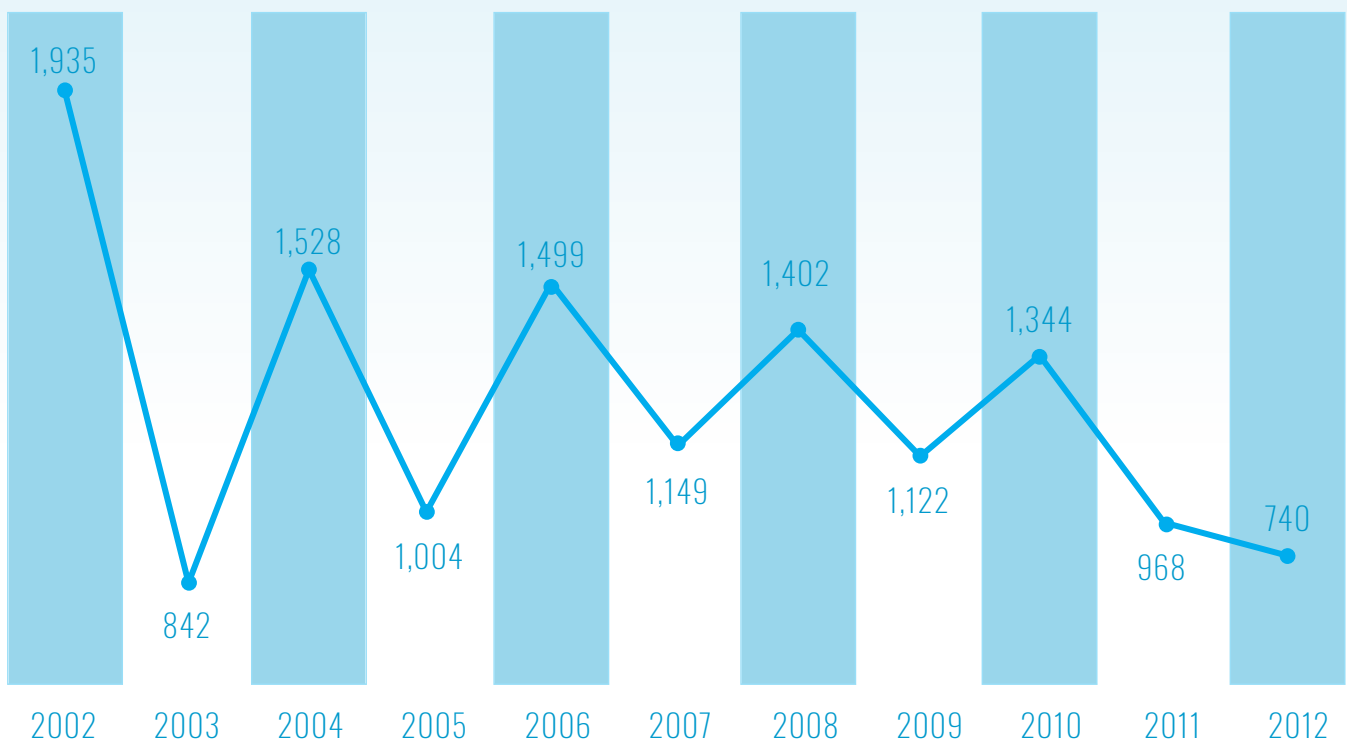
**“A man-made tank can never replicate the complexity, expanse, choice and range of habitats in the ocean environment nor meet the full range of an individual cetacean’s biological capacities and the range of exposure to the physiological adaptations with which the animal is equipped. In captivity, cetaceans cannot be provided with an environment that simulates their natural habitat.”<sup>vii</sup>**

Dolphins are held in marine parks, aquariums, research facilities and other human-made environments throughout the world. Although most captive dolphins were bred in captivity, some were caught from the wild.

The methods of capture are stressful, often harmful and sometimes lethal. Research suggests that mortality rates increase six-fold after capture.<sup>viii</sup> The most well-known dolphin capture in the world occurs in Taiji where fishermen use boats and noise to drive dolphins into shallow netted water.

These dolphins are either killed for their meat or sold into captivity in countries around the world (such as China and the USA). In one season in the small town of Taiji, Japan, 177 dolphins were captured for sale into captivity.<sup>ix</sup> Most captured dolphins are held in marine parks for entertainment purposes, with some held for research or military purposes.<sup>x</sup>

## NUMBER OF DOLPHINS KILLED IN TAIJI DRIVE HUNTS FROM 2002 TO 2012



SOURCE: WHALE AND DOLPHIN CONSERVATION



# WHAT ARE THE IMPACTS OF CAPTIVITY ON DOLPHIN WELFARE?



## In the wild,

dolphins travel large distances every day in social groups known as pods. They play with each other, forage for food, surf, and dive in the water.<sup>xi</sup> They are able to naturally form social structures, and socialise freely with their fellow dolphins. The ocean is a diverse, abundant and colourful environment, with plenty of things for dolphins to see, play with, eat and enjoy.

## In captivity,

dolphins are restricted to small manmade pools and tanks with limited enrichment and limited opportunities for social interaction. They can't dive at depth, swim large distances, find their own food, make new friends or spend time with their family.<sup>xii</sup>

Bonds between mother dolphins and their offspring are long-lasting,<sup>xiii</sup> however in captivity mothers are generally separated from their young. Even very large pools are incapable of replicating their natural ocean environment. Pools and tanks have no live prey to catch, and lack daily variation in temperature, surface and depth.<sup>xiv</sup>



# CAN DOLPHIN CAPTIVITY BE JUSTIFIED?

There is significant debate amongst scientists, animal protection advocates, philosophers, industry members and others regarding the ethics of dolphin captivity. Some people argue that exhibiting dolphins in captivity is ethically justifiable (see 'For captivity' on page 6).

**They make various arguments in favour of captivity, which can be split into three main lines of argument.**



## PHILOSOPHICAL

There is a *philosophical argument* that dolphins do not possess fundamental 'rights' and therefore human beings have the right to keep dolphins in captivity. It is generally considered wrong (and illegal) for humans to keep other humans in captivity against their will because humans possess rights to freedom and liberty. Some animal protection advocates argue that dolphins should also be recognised as having rights to freedom and liberty, as they are intelligent and sentient creatures who should have the right to live in their natural environment.



## SCIENTIFIC

There is a *scientific argument* that keeping dolphins in captivity does not have significant negative impacts on dolphin welfare. It is argued that captive dolphins enjoy adequate welfare standards, as they are protected, guaranteed food and have medical care. In contrast, animal protection advocates argue that dolphin captivity does result in negative impacts on dolphins, who are not suited to the kind of life experienced in artificial environments. Living in tanks and pools can cause stress and reduced lifespans, and lacks the natural enrichment of the ocean environment.



## PRAGMATIC

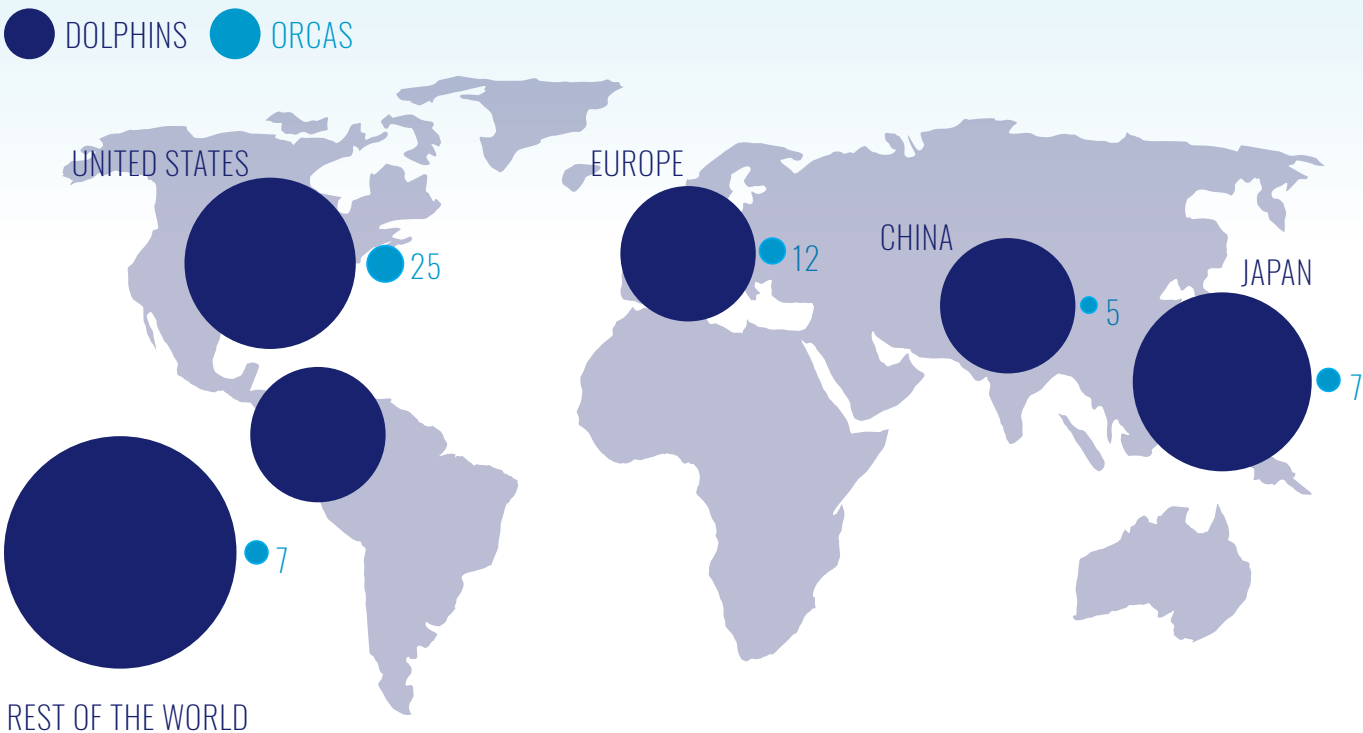
There is a *pragmatic argument* that even if dolphins have rights, and/or captivity does have negative impacts on dolphin welfare, the rights breaches and welfare impacts can be justified. The argument maintains that it is justifiable to breach the rights and/or welfare of some individuals for the greater benefit of the whole species. These benefits include preservation of a captive insurance population in the event of an extinction of dolphins from the wild, and raising public awareness and increasing scientific knowledge about dolphins in order to benefit conservation. Animal protection advocates argue that the infringement of individual rights can not be excused on the basis of the conferral of benefits to the species overall. Additionally, they question the stated benefits, noting that the most commonly held dolphin (common bottlenose dolphin) is not a threatened species, and alternative and arguably more accurate research can be conducted by observation of wild dolphins.

# CONSIDER THE ARGUMENTS ‘FOR’ AND ‘AGAINST’ DOLPHIN CAPTIVITY

## For captivity

<p>Exhibiting dolphins in captivity enables people to learn about dolphins, which can help to support dolphin conservation in the wild.<sup>xv</sup></p> <p>It is important to study dolphin biology, to enable us to understand how to protect them from disease. We also need to study dolphin behaviour, to enable us to understand how best to conserve them in the wild.</p> <p>A captive environment is useful for this kind of sustained scientific study.<sup>xvi</sup></p>	<p>It is possible that certain types of dolphin may become extinct in the wild, and holding some dolphins in captivity ensures an insurance population.<sup>xvii</sup></p>
	<p>Some aspects of the captive dolphin environment are superior to the environment of wild dolphins (such as water quality in some facilities).<sup>xviii</sup></p>
	<p>There is no inherent ethical issue with holding cetaceans in a captive environment, as they do not possess fundamental rights.</p>

## AN ESTIMATED 2,913 DOLPHINS ARE IN CAPTIVITY WORLDWIDE



SOURCE: DIAGRAM FROM STATISTA CHARTS (2015)  
DATA FROM CETA-BASE, ORCA HOME



# CONSIDER THE ARGUMENTS ‘FOR’ AND ‘AGAINST’ DOLPHIN CAPTIVITY

## Against captivity

The link between dolphin exhibition and increased public support for dolphin conservation has not been adequately researched.<sup>xx</sup> Moreover, the public can learn about dolphins through observation of wild dolphins in their natural habitat.

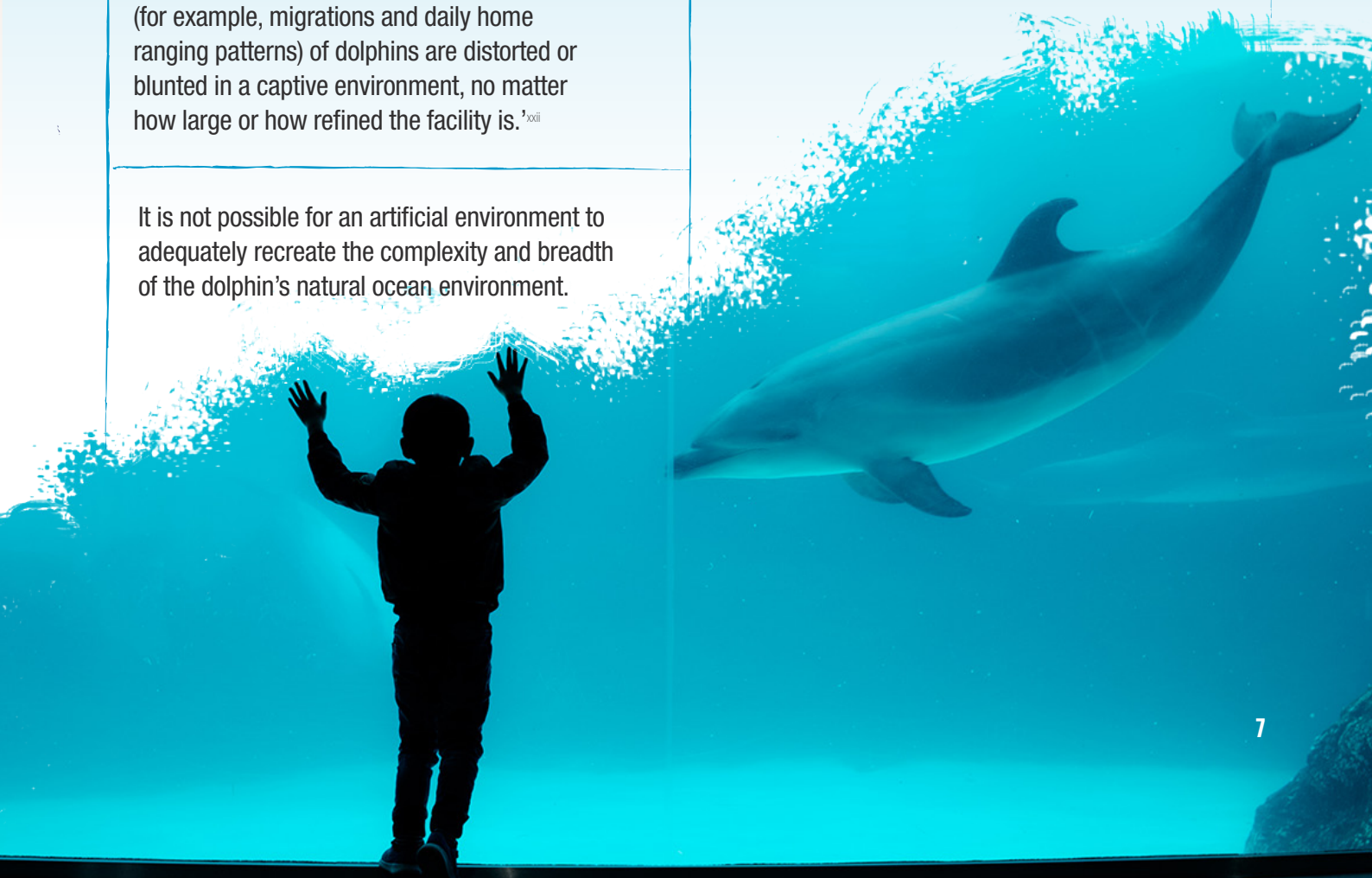
There are alternatives to sustained captivity of dolphins, for the purpose of learning about the biology of dolphins. For instance, it has been suggested that wild dolphins could be taken from the wild briefly for this purpose, and then returned quickly to their natural environment.<sup>xx</sup>

However, it has been questioned ‘whether the captive environment induces atypical behaviour patterns’,<sup>xxi</sup> which limits the usefulness of observations taken of captive dolphins. Moreover, it is a fact that ‘certain natural behaviours (for example, migrations and daily home ranging patterns) of dolphins are distorted or blunted in a captive environment, no matter how large or how refined the facility is.’<sup>xxii</sup>

It is not possible for an artificial environment to adequately recreate the complexity and breadth of the dolphin’s natural ocean environment.

The most commonly exhibited type of dolphin is the Bottlenose dolphin, which is listed as a species of ‘Least Concern’ under the internationally recognised IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.<sup>xxiii</sup> Accordingly, their captivity can’t be justified on the basis of their conservation status.

It is not ethically justifiable to hold a sentient intelligent creature in confinement, against their will. Dolphin captivity violates the rights of dolphins to live in their natural environment, form natural social relationships, and exercise their free will. The stress and reduced lifespans experienced by captive dolphins violates their right to be free from harm.





# WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF DOLPHIN CAPTIVITY?

At least 2000 individual dolphins are currently held in captivity, in approximately 63 countries.<sup>xxiv</sup> However, a number of countries around the world (including the UK and Switzerland) have banned dolphin captivity, with more set to follow.

For dolphins bred in captivity, or who have lived in captivity for many years, returning to the wild could be dangerous. They may not have the knowledge and skills to survive in the open sea. For this reason, a number of people are trying to create sea sanctuaries for dolphins and whales released from pools and tanks, so that they can live out their lives in a more natural environment. Sea sanctuaries are essentially ocean pens, with natural sea water and no hard walls or ceilings.<sup>xxv</sup> Although sea sanctuaries still differ from the open ocean, dolphins have far more room to move in these environments.<sup>xxvi</sup>

## What do you think should be the future for dolphin captivity?

### QUESTION, CONSIDER AND DISCUSS.



**QUESTION** whether it is ethical to keep marine mammals in limited captive environments.



**CONSIDER** the different views on this issue, and decide for yourself where you stand.



**DISCUSS** with your friends, family, classmates and teachers. Debating complex issues is healthy and helpful.



# REFERENCES

- <sup>i</sup> John E Reynolds III, Randall S Wells and Samantha D Eide, *The Bottlenose Dolphin: Biology and Conservation* (University Press of Florida, 2013) 78.
- <sup>ii</sup> Maddalena Bearzi and Craig Stanford, 'A Bigger, Better Brain: Observations of chimpanzees and dolphins strengthen the notion that humanlike intelligence may not be uniquely human' (2010) *American Scientist* 98 (5) 402, 404.
- <sup>iii</sup> Jason N Bruck, 'Decades-long social memory in bottlenose dolphins' (2013) 280 (1768) *Proceedings: Biological Sciences* 1, 1.
- <sup>iv</sup> Dolphin Research Centre, 'Dolphin Maternity' <<https://dolphins.org/maternity>>.
- <sup>v</sup> Bearzi and Stanford, above n2, 405.
- <sup>vi</sup> Rob Lott and Cathy Williamson, 'Cetaceans in Captivity' in Andy Butterworth (ed), *Marine Mammal Welfare: Human Induced Change in the Marine Environment and its Impacts on Marine Mammal Welfare* (Springer, 2017) 169.
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid, 167.
- <sup>viii</sup> World Animal Protection, 'Dolphin FAQ', <[www.worldanimalprotection.us.org/our-work/animals-wild/marine-animals-captivity/dolphin-faq](http://www.worldanimalprotection.us.org/our-work/animals-wild/marine-animals-captivity/dolphin-faq)>
- <sup>ix</sup> Whale and Dolphin Conservation 'Dolphin Hunts - Focus on Taiji, Japan' <[au.whales.org/issues/dolphin-hunts-focus-on-taiji-japan](http://au.whales.org/issues/dolphin-hunts-focus-on-taiji-japan)>.
- <sup>x</sup> Lott and Williamson, above n6, 162.
- <sup>xi</sup> RSPCA Australia, 'Research Report: The Welfare of Dolphins In Captivity' (2017) 1-2.
- <sup>xii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Susan H. Shane, Randall S. Wells and Bernd Würsig, 'Ecology, Behavior and Social Organization of the Bottlenose Dolphin: A Review' (1986) 2 (1) *Marine Mammal Science* 34, 34.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Australia for Dolphins, 'State of Suffering: Dolphin Captivity in Australia' (AFD, 2017) 14.
- <sup>xv</sup> Reynolds et al, above n1, 154
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ibid, 156.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ibid 158.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Ibid, 159.
- <sup>xix</sup> Yixing Jiang, Michael Lück and E.C.M. Parsons, 'Public Awareness, Education, and Marine Mammals in Captivity' (2008) 11 *Tourism Review International* 237, 238.
- <sup>xx</sup> Reynolds et al, above n1, 157.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> International Union for Conservation of Nature, 'Tursiops truncatus' <<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/22563/0>>.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Born Free, 'Captive Whales and Dolphins – Global' <[www.bornfree.org.uk/campaigns/zoo-check/captive-whales-dolphins/global/](http://www.bornfree.org.uk/campaigns/zoo-check/captive-whales-dolphins/global/)>.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Action for Dolphins, 'A Sea Sanctuary – the Kind Alternative For Captive Dolphins' (2016) <<http://blog.afd.org.au/uncategorized/a-sea-sanctuary-the-kindalternative-for-captive-dolphins/>>.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid.

## CONNECT WITH US TO LEARN MORE

### Download Animal Protection Education (APE)

Each APE is a set of free resources designed to enrich any educational curriculum with animal protection-themed activities and teaching strategies.

### Engage and support

Our work is not possible without the support of compassionate Australians like yourself. Please help protect animals from cruelty by joining our growing community of supporters.

### Join us on Facebook

**Educators** - Join our closed group on Facebook, Voiceless: Teachers for Animal Protection.

**Students** - Join our closed group on Facebook, Voiceless: Youth for Animals.

### Find out more

Check out our education resources, school and university presentations and activities at **[voiceless.org.au](http://voiceless.org.au)** or by contacting **[education@voiceless.org.au](mailto:education@voiceless.org.au)**.