

Scientists Call For End to Dolphin Drive Hunts in Japan

Group cites scientific and ethical justification for ending the hunts.

WASHINGTON, DC (July 20, 2006)—A consortium of scientists and zoo and aquarium professionals issued a report today condemning Japan’s dolphin drive hunts, which result in the inhumane slaughter of thousands of these highly intelligent marine mammals each year. Citing a body of scientific literature on the mental, emotional, and social characteristics of dolphins, the group, which includes scientists from the New York Aquarium, Emory University, and other organizations, say that the hunts are an astonishingly cruel violation of any reasonable welfare standards and should end immediately.

After lengthy discussions with Japanese authorities on the issue, the group has issued a report that cites numerous studies on the cognitive abilities, cultural richness, and above all, the capacity of dolphins to experience pain and suffering. This evidence, say group members, mandates that the Japanese government should ban the hunts, which take place every year in the villages of Taiji and Futo.

“The Japanese drive hunt of dolphins and small cetaceans is an inhumane practice that violates all reasonable criteria for animal welfare. Scientific evidence clearly shows that the drive hunts inflict pain and suffering on animals that are intelligent, sentient, and socially complex,” said Dr. Diana Reiss, Senior Research Scientist and Director of the New York Aquarium’s Marine Mammal Research Program. “The methods of slaughter employed on these highly intelligent and sentient beings constitute a level of cruelty that any nation should find intolerable.”

In addition to the New York Aquarium and Emory, the group comprises research scientists and veterinarians from the School of Medicine at the University of San Diego, Dalhousie University, the University of Hawaii, the University of Notre Dame, and

professionals from the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA).

Occurring annually from October to April, the dolphin hunts are conducted by small groups of Japanese fishermen and are regulated by the Japanese Government. During the hunts, fishermen herd hundreds, sometimes thousands, of dolphins and other small cetaceans into shallow bays by banging on partially submerged rods that create a sonic barrier. Once there, the dolphins are corralled into nets and then speared, hooked, hoisted into the air by their tail by cranes in a manner that is inhumane by any standard. The animals are then slaughtered in an unjustifiably brutal manner, eviscerated alive, and many are left to die a long and painful death.

The Japanese government has made the unsupported claim that the animals are competitors with the fisherman for fish and that the drives are conducted as pest control. The Japanese government is encouraging the public to consume dolphin meat despite indications that it has become increasingly unpopular. The slaughtered dolphins are used for fertilizer, pet food, and for human consumption. In some cases, live dolphins are procured from the drives for aquariums and interactive swim programs in Japan and China, a practice that violates the Code of Ethics maintained by WAZA.

“The scientific evidence is abundantly clear—the Japanese dolphin hunts are an assault on intelligent, sentient, and emotional beings with brains that should make us all stop and think” said Dr. Lori Marino, Senior Lecturer in Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology at Emory University.

According to the group, the ethical argument for ending the drive is supported by a solid foundation of scientific evidence indicating that dolphins possess the mental and emotional capacities for pain and suffering on a par with great apes and humans. These facts include:

- Dolphins have the largest brains relative to body size of any living species of animal and second only to modern humans; dolphin brain size relative to body size is equal to that of our recent hominid ancestors.
- The brains of dolphins are more convoluted (have more folds and more surface area) than the brains of humans. The surface area of the brain is correlated with complexity in cognitive abilities.
- One species—the bottlenose dolphin—has been found to possess the ability for mirror self-recognition. In 2001, Drs. Reiss and Marino published evidence that dolphins recognize themselves in mirrors, a capacity shown only in great apes and humans and considered a hallmark of self-awareness.
- Dolphin health and immune system function is severely compromised by the chase and capture in the hunts.
- Dolphins can understand and convey abstract concepts, and can comprehend thousands of unique “sentences” composed of symbolic gestures, and have the capacity to remember past events in a manner similar to great apes and humans.

It is increasingly clear that dolphins have social traditions and cultures, complex interdependent relationships, and strong family ties all of which are susceptible to disruption or even dissolution in the drives.

Aside from the issue of welfare, researchers point out that the dolphin drive hunts also raise concerns about the conservation status of several species of cetacean taken in the hunts, which indiscriminately target all species of cetacean. Besides bottlenose dolphins, which make up the bulk of the annual take, the hunts also include striped dolphins, spotted dolphins, Risso’s dolphins, false killer whales, and short-finned pilot whales. Most of the species are included on the World Conservation Union’s Red List of Threatened Species. Also, the hunts have resulted in growing criticism from relevant management organizations on both conservation and welfare grounds, including the International Whaling Commission (IWC), the treaty organization that regulates the hunting of the great whale species.

Given that science has revealed so many social and cognitive parallels between dolphins and the great apes, species that are highly respected in Japanese culture, the scientific group cites the tragic irony of the singular brutality of the Japanese dolphin hunts.

The group is speaking out to raise global awareness, concern, and condemnation of the dolphin drives. They strongly urge the Japanese Government to terminate the drives based on the abundant scientific evidence about dolphin sentience and the growing global concern for more humane treatment of animals. The public is being asked to join their effort in a global response by signing a **Letter to the Prime Minister of Japan and other members of the Japanese Government, which can be found at www.actfordolphins.com**