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Dolphinaria-Free Europe coalition objects to the import of beluga whales into EU

Just months after the Canadian Government passed legislation¹ prohibiting the breeding of whales and dolphins and their export for entertainment purposes, authorities in Canada have already approved the transfer of two beluga whales from Marineland in Ontario, Canada to L'Océanogràfic in Valencia, Spain. Dolphinaria-Free Europe is calling on Spanish CITES authorities to deny the import of belugas into the country.

The import of cetaceans into the European Union for captive display is highly controversial and under EU legislation, the CITES Scientific Authority in Spain must be satisfied that the intended accommodation for the belugas be adequately equipped to conserve and care for the animals properly. Dolphinaria-Free Europe believes this is not the case at L'Océanogràfic.

It is well documented in the scientific literature that cetaceans held in captivity suffer significant and numerous health and welfare problems as a result of confinement in captivity. When denied adequate space, individuals from wide-ranging species commonly develop problems such as abnormal repetitive behaviours (termed stereotypies), thought to be a coping mechanism in a stressful environment, and aggression². Beluga home ranges are over 800 km² in area, yet the beluga tank at L'Océanogràfic is small (the total 'Arctic' dome display area, which includes other animals on display such as walrus, is 50m in diameter, and the beluga tank covers less than 50% of this dome)³. Adding more belugas to this small facility will exacerbate the issues.

In Canada, the recent passage of the law to protect whales and dolphins, sometimes referred to as the 'Free Willy Bill,' has made it illegal to breed, import or export cetaceans for entertainment purposes. This applies to the last two facilities with cetaceans in the country; the Vancouver Aquarium, keeping one Pacific white-sided dolphin, and Marineland in Ontario, keeping over 60 cetaceans, including bottlenose dolphins, beluga whales and one orca.

With dozens of beluga whales in each of Marineland's tanks, one argument made by Canadian authorities in support of the transfer is that it would be in the best interests of the animals, because it would reduce over-crowding at Marineland. However, Dolphinaria-Free Europe is concerned that the whales will experience similar or even worse over-crowding at L'Océanogràfic. There, the whales will be kept indoors for the rest of their lives and never see the sun again. The tank is already too small for the three belugas already housed there. One whale shows signs of extreme stereotypical behaviour and also has a skin condition.

While the permit to transfer the whales states their intended use will be for 'scientific research', it is the belief of Dolphinaria-Free Europe that the primary use of the whales will be for public display, and

¹ Bill S-203. An Act to amend the Criminal Code and other Acts (ending the captivity of whales and dolphins). <https://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/bill/S-203/royal-assent>

² Clubb, R. & Mason, G. (2003). Captivity effects on wide-ranging carnivores. *Nature* 425: 473-474

³ The 'Arctic' dome can be easily identified on Google Earth, Google Maps or similar and is found at (39°27'12.4"N 0°20'46.8"W 39.453449, -0.346340) <https://goo.gl/maps/x2Ztg4i5pdqi4iK7A>

more concerning, for a breeding programme meant to sustain the display of belugas for entertainment in Europe.

“The coalition is completely opposed to this transfer” said Margaux Dodds, Chair of Dolphinarium-Free Europe. “We are disappointed that an exemption has been made to export two whales out of Canada for the purpose of ‘research,’ when in reality their use for display and entertainment should make the transfer illegal under the new law in Canada.” She went on to say “The spirit of the Canadian law was to prevent future generations of whales and dolphins from suffering. By allowing the animals to be exported and bred overseas makes a mockery of that”.

The coalition has also raised concerns regarding the transport of the whales, stating that such transfers should only be undertaken in emergency situations, to urgently address the health and welfare of an animal, or to relocate a former entertainment animal to a dedicated seaside sanctuary intended to improve the animal’s long-term health and welfare.

Dolphinarium-Free Europe is a coalition whose members include eminent marine mammal scientists, conservationists and NGOs from around the globe. Members work together to end the keeping of cetaceans in captivity across Europe, sharing the position that wild animals should not be exploited for human entertainment.

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