

**INTERNATIONAL CODE OF BEST PRACTICES  
FOR  
DOLPHIN FACILITIES**



# INTRODUCTION

Bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) are the signature marine mammal species in human care. Dolphins in the care of humans must be treated with the utmost respect and dignity, provided state-of-the-art care based on scientific knowledge and best professional practices, and housed in specialized facilities that meet their needs.

In most countries, aquariums, zoos and marine parks are regulated, inspected, and licensed by governments. The most respected zoos and aquariums worldwide also are accredited by professional organizations in accordance with rigorous standards and guidelines that often exceed legal requirements. These standards and guidelines are based on the best available science and reflect the decades-long experience and expertise of the dedicated professionals who work for these facilities. Accreditation standards have resulted in dolphins in human care that are healthy, breeding successfully, and now living substantially longer than dolphins in the wild. Facilities accredited under these standards and guidelines also provide high quality education and contribute to scientific advancement and species conservation.

This *International Code of Best Practices for Dolphin Facilities* is based upon these professional accreditation standards and promotes the best practices in animal care, education programming, scientific advancement, responsible in-water interactive programs, and the conservation of dolphins in the wild.

When selecting a zoological park or aquarium, the public, tour operators, cruise lines, and travel agents can be assured that accredited facilities cherish their dolphins and place the highest priority on the dolphins' health and welfare. While it is optimal and preferred that all marine mammal facilities be accredited and benefit from the expertise of accrediting body organizations, this *International Code of Best Practices for Dolphins* provides a benchmark against which unaccredited facilities can be measured.

# CODE OF BEST PRACTICES

## ANIMAL CARE

The well being of dolphins cared for in zoological parks and aquariums is of the utmost importance and every effort must be made to ensure that these animals, cared for by trained professionals, live long, enriched, and healthy lives.

Accredited facilities as well as those that meet the high standards of this Code:

- Make balanced decisions regarding dolphin care and welfare based on scientific knowledge and professional judgment with consideration of ethical and societal values.
- Feed dolphins high-quality seafood that meets their dietary requirements and preferences, and make nutritional adjustments for pregnant, young, and/or aging dolphins.
- Monitor the animals' food on a routine basis to ensure it is wholesome. Store fish and other foods at proper temperatures and in a manner that maintains full nutrient values and prevents contamination. Keep food preparation areas clean and sanitized. Maintain daily food and nutrition records for every animal in the facility's collection.
- Institute a program of veterinary care supervised by licensed and experienced professionals that includes complete physical examinations of each animal at regular intervals and maintenance of daily individual health records.
- Develop and implement animal breeding programs with guidance from experienced professionals, taking into account the characteristics of each individual animal as well as the needs of the population in human care as a whole. Monitor expectant females' health closely during pregnancy, and create an environment conducive to the successful rearing of calves.
- Evaluate every dolphin that comes from another facility and separate (quarantine) an animal if there is concern that the new arrival might harbor an illness that could affect the health of the dolphins currently in the facility.
- When reconstructing a habitat or building a new exhibit, optimize the size and qualitative features of dolphin enclosures that may include shallow water depths for habitat diversity. Provide a variety of enclosures differing in size and depth that enhance social interaction between the animals. Base new facility designs not only on professional experience, but also on other institutions with comparable collections and recent construction. Meet and/or exceed space requirements instituted by the government entity, and, if applicable, the accrediting organization.
- Maintain structurally sound, safe facilities that are in good condition to prevent personnel, guest or dolphin injury.
- Provide washroom facilities that include basins, sinks, and, when appropriate, showers that are conveniently located to maintain cleanliness among animal care staff. Clean and sanitize these facilities daily.

## ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Dolphins in human care require close attention to water quality and environmental conditions to ensure the animals' health and comfort. The water in dolphin facilities should replicate their environments in the wild through the use of natural salts that approximate levels found in seawater. (Inland facilities that use natural seawater may be exempt from some of the requirements below.)

Accredited facilities as well as those that meet the high standards of this Code:

- Include an effective program of disinfection, bacterial monitoring of habitats, and/or general exhibit maintenance.
- Test for bacteria in pool water weekly and monitor coliform counts.
- Test pool water as necessary to maintain pH values appropriate to the dolphins' well being.
- Test water for concentration of chlorine and/or other oxidizing agents.
- Test water treated with sodium chloride or a combination of sodium chloride and other naturally occurring sea salts regularly to ensure appropriate and healthy water quality parameters.
- Ventilate indoor habitats to provide a flow of fresh air.
- Ensure that dolphins are not exposed to noises of sufficient intensity or type within their range of hearing to cause auditory discomfort or distress to the animals. Acoustically isolate sound-generating mechanical equipment and have a plan in place to monitor equipment noise.
- For indoor dolphin facilities, provide ample lighting by either natural or artificial means or both.
- Establish contingency plans that ensure emergency sources of water for the habitat and electric power for the facility in the event of failure.
- House dolphins only in facilities in which appropriate air and water temperature ranges are maintained to ensure their health and comfort. Provide access to shelter/shade to afford them protection from adverse weather and direct sunlight.

## TRAINING

The bond between dolphins and their trainers is based on mutual respect and positive reinforcement training. The keys to animal welfare—and the focus of animal care professionals—are advanced, state-of-the-art veterinary and husbandry programs, complemented by behavioral enrichment programs that offer an array of tailored activities, including regular exercise, play, and naturalistic and trained behaviors that are safe and mentally and physically stimulating.

Accredited facilities and those that meet the high standards of this Code:

- Conduct dolphin training only in a positive manner.
- Train dolphins to voluntarily participate in routine physical examinations that are essential to their health and assist animal care staff in managing successful preventative health programs.
- Develop, regularly review, and update when appropriate their animal training policy, which outlines objectives, methods of accomplishments, and criteria for success.
- Employ a sufficient number of qualified staff to meet program requirements.
- Encourage staff membership and participation in professional organizations such as the International Marine Animal Trainers' Association.
- Provide educational materials for animal care and training staff, including professional journals. Establish teaching programs that provide hands-on experience and learning theories for new staff. Consider internships and information exchange activities with other facilities.

## EDUCATION

Learning about dolphin physiology, biology, and their ocean environments at zoological parks and aquariums fosters an awareness of environmental issues and inspires a commitment to the conservation of dolphins and their habitats in the wild.

Accredited facilities as well as those that meet the high standards of this Code:

- Use a variety of techniques to educate children and adults, ranging from on-site interpretive graphics and guided tours to audio-visual materials and formal education programs.
- Establish outreach programs for teachers, school children, and community groups.
- Provide accurate information to the public based on the best current scientific knowledge through educational programs supervised by a qualified, experienced professional.
- Offer multiple levels of learning opportunities through education programming for all ages as well as teacher training.
- Provide staff the opportunity to join professional organizations, attend educational conferences, and maintain up-to-date reference materials on dolphins.



## IN-WATER INTERACTIVE PROGRAMS

Many zoological parks and aquariums offer swim and encounter programs that provide the public an opportunity to have a unique, up-close educational experience with the animals in a safe, controlled environment.

Accredited facilities as well as those that meet the high standards of this Code:

- Operate interactive programs with specific husbandry, training, educational, and safety protocols that reflect best professional practices.
- Ensure that dolphins participating in interactive programs are specifically trained for interacting with the public.
- Employ supervisory staff members who have actively participated in the training and husbandry of dolphins to oversee these interactive programs. Ensure that responsible, experienced, and readily identifiable professional staff members are present during public contact with the animals.
- Provide dolphins the opportunity to choose to participate in an interactive program. During any program session, include in their habitat an area that is accessible and inviting to the animals where human participants are not allowed to enter.
- Ensure that each dolphin has at least one rest period of 10 continuous hours without public interaction within a 24-hour period, under the supervision of a qualified, experienced animal care professional.
- Include in their educational programming a warning that feeding dolphins in the wild is detrimental to the animals and that swimming with wild marine mammals can be harmful to both the animals and the people involved. If these activities in the wild are prohibited by law in the country in which the facility is located, this should be emphasized.
- Establish rigorous protocols important to help ensure guest and dolphin health and safety:
  - Request that a guest certify that he/she is in good physical health and has no illnesses, disabilities, injuries or physical condition including pregnancy, which would prevent or hinder safe participation in an interactive program.
  - Preclude guests with any respiratory infection, open sores, or other outward signs of contagious illness from interacting with a dolphin.
  - When appropriate, adapt an interactive program to enable guests with injuries, chronic conditions, or physical or mental disabilities (e.g. military veterans) to safely and more fully enjoy these programs.
  - Require, at minimum, all guests to wash their hands with antibacterial soap and step into a footbath before the interaction.
  - Prior to any interactive session, educate guests about how to properly and safely interact with the animals, and remove any member of the public who refuses to participate responsibly in an interactive session.
  - Do not mislead the public by claiming that human interactions with dolphins can cure a disease or heal a medical or psychological condition.

## ACQUISITION

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) estimates that there are a minimum of 600,000 bottlenose dolphins in the oceans worldwide, categorizing their population as a species “of least concern.” [www.iucnredlist.org/details/22563/0](http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/22563/0). Regardless of the abundance of dolphins in the wild, the goal of this Code is to ensure dolphin populations in human care are sustainable through reproductive programs that promote good health and genetic diversity.

Accredited facilities as well as those that meet the high standards of this Code:

- Institute animal management plans that emphasize sustaining their dolphin population through enhanced animal welfare practices and prioritize acquisition of dolphins through managed breeding programs, partnerships with other zoological institutions, and providing homes for stranded dolphins that have been rescued and deemed non-releasable by the appropriate government authorities.
- Prior to any collection of animals, document that any removal of an animal from the wild will not compromise the sustainability of the species or population from which the dolphins will be removed.
- Meet the requirements of all applicable CITES, local, state/provincial, regional, national, and international laws and regulations.
- Collect in a humane manner.



## SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION

Scientific research has improved the welfare of dolphins in human care and contributed substantially to the conservation of the species in the wild. The access granted by zoological parks and aquariums to researchers studying dolphins provides unique opportunities that cannot be duplicated in the wild. Findings from this research often provide benefits for dolphins living in rapidly changing environments, including oceans, estuaries, and rivers worldwide. Much of what is known about dolphin health care, physiology, acoustics, reproductive biology, and cognition has been learned from scientific studies in marine life parks.

Dolphins in the wild are continually exposed to disease, parasites, predators, and naturally occurring biotoxins. Increasing human-related challenges for dolphins include coastal development that results in habitat loss, exposure to pollutants, vessel strikes, noise, oil and gas development, and entanglement in debris, fishing lines, and nets. Aquarium experts participate in health assessments of wild dolphin populations, and their facilities fund studies of the animals' feeding habits, distribution patterns, modes of communications, and threats they face from human activities in the wild.

Accredited facilities as well as those that meet the high standards of this Code:

- Advance scientific knowledge and the well being of dolphins in the wild and in human care by:
  - Conducting research at their facility; and/or
  - Financially contributing to outside, bona fide studies such as conservation research with dolphins in the wild; and/or
  - Collaborating with research organizations, universities, the scientific community, and/or government partners; and/or
  - Making their dolphins available for study, when practicable and with consideration for the animals' well-being; and/or
  - Supporting research by providing access to biological specimens and/or husbandry records.

## STRANDED DOLPHINS

Zoological parks and aquariums worldwide are leaders in government-coordinated stranding programs, responding to and rescuing marine mammals that beach themselves. The goals of these programs are to rescue, rehabilitate, and release the animals. These facilities voluntarily dedicate the expertise of their professional staff and substantial funding to help bring these rescued animals back to health. They construct special facilities to care for sick, injured, or orphaned animals, and manage tens of thousands of volunteer hours annually to help these animals survive. During periods of rehabilitation, these stranded marine mammals are to be treated with the same respect and dignity, and the best practices enumerated in this Code are to be adhered to as applicable.

