



An international organization dedicated to conservation through public display, education, and research

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Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks & Aquariums statement on Georgia Aquarium's complaint seeking to overturn permit denial for beluga whale import

"We strongly support Georgia Aquarium's action today to file a complaint seeking to overturn a permit denial by NOAA Fisheries, formerly known as the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), to bring to the U.S. 18 beluga whales collected over three years in Russia. We believe Georgia Aquarium's permit application met the requirements of the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and made a compelling case for the importance of this import to the long term sustainability of the population in human care, as well as to the continued scientific research and education programs, which help ensure the sustainability of the species in the wild.

The MMPA allows for collections of marine mammals for public display because Congress recognized the importance of enabling the public to see and learn about these extraordinary animals. The MMPA also specifically encourages the practice of caring for these animals at aquariums and zoos in order to advance scientific study and research and encourage conservation action by U.S. citizens by raising public awareness.

NOAA Fisheries' decision ignored the five-year study which determined that a certain number animals could be humanely and legally removed each year from the Sea of Okhotsk without harming the robust local beluga population. These findings were reviewed and validated by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the world's oldest and largest global environmental organization and the leading authority on the environment and sustainable development.

Under MMPA regulations, Alliance members may undertake humane, legal collection of marine mammals from sustainable wild populations for public display that results in educational experience for the public and conservation programs that help wild populations. As a result of the Alliance's cooperative breeding programs and dedication to unparalleled animal care and welfare, the need for more beluga whales has not existed until now, when additional genetic diversity is needed to help to ensure the sustainability of the beluga whale population in human care.

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Through original research and partnerships with global conservation leaders, including the IUCN and NOAA, Alliance members contribute regularly to the international body of knowledge about beluga whales, as well as that of all marine mammals in their care. The study of belugas in human care increases our understanding of their biology, physiology and behavior, and creates critical baseline indicators for the investigation of threats to the whales in their natural habitats. Much of this research would be difficult, if not impossible, to conduct in the wild. For example, like many Alliance members who conduct essential field research that benefits belugas in the wild, Georgia Aquarium works with NOAA Fisheries and other federal, state and tribal agencies to protect and preserve beluga whales in Bristol Bay, Alaska.

Alliance members have worked with NOAA and other federal and state agencies over the last several decades to ensure the survival and sustainability of marine mammals around the world. Our members respond to stranding events by assisting in rescue efforts, providing rehabilitation, and long-term care and lend scientific expertise and many other resources to the agency when animals are in need.

Alliance members are committed to fostering a greater understanding of and appreciation for marine mammals and their aquatic habitats and inspiring increased environmental stewardship. According to a 2012 Harris poll, 94 percent of Americans believe visiting an aquarium or marine life park can inspire conservation action that helps marine mammals and their natural environments. ”

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