



# European Association for Aquatic Mammals

Devoted to marine mammal  
conservation since 1972.

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## **Open letter to the Vancouver Parks Board and citizens of Vancouver**

On March 9<sup>th</sup> the Park Board voted to ban the display of whales, dolphins and porpoises at the Vancouver Aquarium. According to the commissioners, they voted according to “public will”. We, the members of the European Association for Aquatic Mammals, respect this decision, but would like to draw attention to the impact this will have on the conservation of marine mammals and the ethical inconsistency of following a public will that contradicts other aspects of society’s common goals.

Zoos and aquariums do such research which addresses the following questions: How does a species or an individual of a species experience life and how can we take care of each species and individual in a way that meets their needs and leads to their wellbeing under our care?

We, as representatives of zoos and aquariums, affirm that we are responsible for the well-being of the animals in our care. We affirm that we must respect and fulfill the needs of the animals in our institutions. We have instigated the dramatic changes that our members have undergone in the last decades from the purely commercial exploitation of marine mammals for the entertainment of our visitors to establishing environmental institutions that keep animals for the sake of conservation. Our mission is to inspire our visitors, investigate the psychological and ecological needs of our animals and help establish methods to conserve, keep and breed them.

The work of accredited zoos and aquariums reflects another movement in Western society: the fight for the conservation of biodiversity. The ethical basis of our work is that humans are responsible for the future of the planet, especially its living inhabitants and habitats. Humans are the only species in the world able to take responsibility for other species and as such are obliged to make decisions directly involved in the lives of other living beings.

Since the 1970s it has become apparent that the planet faces a rapid and dramatic loss of species. According to Red List of Threatened Species from The International Union for Conservation of Nature, mammals with a body



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weight of more than one kilogram face extinction worldwide. In many cases the protection of threatened species in the field is still possible, but there are more and more instances where survival in the wild is unlikely. In such cases the capture of the last individuals may save the species.

The success of human intervention is shown with the Californian Condor. The last 27 wild birds were caught in 1987. They were bred in aviaries and have been slowly released since 1992; the species is currently out of danger with numbers around 600.

The world missed the opportunity to save the “Baiji” Chinese river dolphin when there were only 19 individuals left. The Baiji is the first dolphin species that we let die out “with dignity” because humans did not take responsibility and capture the last known individuals to breed for future release. The Baiji has been functionally extinct since 2007.

Vancouver Aquarium is being forced to close its doors to whales and dolphins at a time when a second dolphin species is facing extinction. The Vaquita porpoise species has fewer than 70 individuals; there is no longer hope that the species will survive in the wild. It is now up to humans to decide whether to make a final attempt to save the species by capturing the last individuals, caring for them with the help of professional marine parks, and trying to breed them until Baja California has reached an ecological state that can once again guarantee their survival.

Breeding critically endangered species is only possible when there are places where the animals can be kept and where professionals know how to fulfill their biological and psychological needs. Keeping whales and dolphins is a biological, technical and financial challenge and there are only a few institutions remaining that are able to keep marine mammals in accordance with animal welfare’s best practice guidelines.

Vancouver Aquarium and other marine mammal parks that are dedicated to conservation and animal welfare have an increasing impact on the protection of marine mammals. Having wild animals survive, breed and thrive in human care requires highly specialized professional expertise. It is a scientific undertaking and the knowledge acquired can make contributions far beyond the zoo and aquarium world. All of the veterinary care proficiency for stranded dolphins comes from the veterinary care of dolphins in marine mammal parks.



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The list of endangered dolphins and whales will only grow. Overfishing and pollution of the oceans have turned habitats into deadly traps for many species. Zoological parks and aquariums can't save aquatic habitats, but they may help save some species and many stranded individuals. This is only possible if they have the professional experience and expertise that comes from keeping animals.

With the Parks Board's decision, there is now another blank spot on the map of potential rescue centers for the whales and dolphins of the world. Who will now take over responsibility and care for animal species at the brink of extinction or for individual animals facing human-caused death on our beaches?

The philosophical approaches of animal rights and of human responsibility meet in the scientific field of animal welfare. But they diverge in the field of conservation. We do not agree that animals should go extinct "with dignity" rather than be kept in human care.

We, the official representatives of the European Association for Aquatic Mammals are deeply concerned about and saddened by the Park Board's decision.



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