

# Hong Kong drops plan to import rare whales

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A six-week-old beluga whale swims with its mother at an aquarium in Chicago, Illinois. A Hong Kong theme park has dropped a contentious plan to buy and import rare wild-caught beluga whales, in a decision lauded Friday by conservationists who had protested against the bid.

A Hong Kong theme park has dropped a contentious plan to buy and import rare wild-caught beluga whales, in a decision lauded Friday by conservationists who had protested against the bid.

Activists opposed Ocean Park's plan to import the whales, classified as "near threatened", from Russia, saying they are often injured or killed during capture and [mortality rates](#) are high among those in captivity.

The park had wanted to use the belugas, usually found around the [Arctic circle](#), to raise public awareness of [climate change](#) through its new Polar Adventure attraction to open next year.

"After due consideration, we have decided not to pursue an acquisition from the wild even though the removal of some [beluga whales](#) has been shown to be sustainable," Allan Zeman, Ocean Park's chairman, said in a statement.

The popular 34-year-old theme park and aquarium is owned by the Hong Kong government and has set out ambitious plans to boost visitors. The park recorded five million tourists last year.

The beluga, or white whale, is on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) "red list" of "near threatened" species, while the US and Canada have effectively banned the whales' capture from their waters.

"The park did the right thing. We certainly welcome the decision," Samuel Hung, chairman of the Hong Kong Dolphin Conservation Society, told AFP.

"It's not right to confine a large intelligent mammal inside a tank, this is harming their chance of survival and send a wrong message to the public -- that whenever we need them for entertainment purpose, we can go out to catch them."

The park has previously come under the spotlight over its conservation and protection of rare animals.

Last year, Washington-based Animal Welfare Institute has said Ocean Park was trying to capture some 30 dolphins in the Solomon Islands, possibly in breach of [animal conservation](#) rules -- a claim which was later rejected by the park.

Any dolphin imports from the cluster of islands near Papua New Guinea would breach the Convention on International Trade in Endangered

Species (CITES).

In 2009, three rare sturgeon -- which were among a group of 10 sturgeon donated to the theme park to mark China's hosting of the Olympics in 2008 -- died in the park.

The endangered fish died because of different reasons including head injury, blood clotting, infection while one was killed by a bite from barracuda in the aquarium.

Outside the park, conservation groups such as the WWF have consistently appealed to restaurants in Hong Kong -- the largest importer of shark fin globally in 2007 -- to stop using the fins in the popular soup delicacy.

Scientists blame the practice of shark-finning for a worldwide collapse in shark populations.

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