

Groups propose ocean refuges for captive dolphins, whales

August 8 2017, by Caleb Jones



In this May 13, 2017 photo, an activist holds a sign during a protest outside Sea Life Park in Waimanalo, Hawaii. A marine mammal that has contributed to groundbreaking science for the past 30 years is again making waves after being sold to the marine amusement park in Hawaii. Kina is a false killer whale, a large member of the dolphin family. Animal-rights activists say she deserves a peaceful retirement in an ocean-based refuge but is instead being traumatized by confinement in concrete tanks at Sea Life Park. But Kina's former Navy trainer and a longtime marine mammal researcher say no such sea sanctuaries exist, and the park is the best place for the 40-year-old toothy cetacean. (AP Photo/Caleb

Jones)

A Hawaii marine park's purchase of Kina, a 40-year-old false killer whale long used in echolocation research, has reignited a debate about captive marine mammals and the places that care for them.

Most of the world's captive cetaceans - dolphins, whales and porpoises - are now born in marine-park breeding programs, though some are still taken from the wild. Since they're so expensive to care for, even marine mammals used solely for research, like Kina, often end up at attractions like Oahu's Sea Life Park.

Animal-rights activists are calling for the creation of ocean-based refuges, where they say captive marine animals could retire and live a life closer to nature. At least two groups already are working to create such sanctuaries, but experts question whether they can stay afloat.

A closer look at the discussion:

HOW DO MARINE MAMMALS END UP IN CAPTIVITY?

In the past, many were captured from the wild, taken from their family pods and put in marine parks.

In Japan, fishermen would round up scores of dolphins and whales in coves, killing most but selecting some for sale to parks. That fishery has been widely criticized, and most marine parks no longer take its animals.

Kina is believed to be the last living captive animal in the United States

taken from a Japanese dolphin drive.



In this June 8, 2017 image made from video, Kina, a false killer whale, swims in a tank at Sea Life Park in Waimanalo, Hawaii. The former U.S. Navy research whale that has contributed to groundbreaking science for the past 30 years is again making waves after being sold to a marine amusement park in Hawaii. Animal-rights activists say Kina, a 13-foot-long (4-meter) member of the dolphin family, deserves a peaceful retirement in an ocean-based refuge, but is instead being traumatized by confinement in concrete tanks. But Kina's former Navy trainer and a longtime marine mammal researcher say no such sea sanctuaries exist, and the park is the best place for the 40-year-old toothy cetacean. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

Today, most marine mammals in parks are born in captive breeding programs that originated when wild animals were taken from the ocean.

Parks and aquariums have long moved animals among different facilities to ensure genetic diversity but can now mail sperm from their animals to other parks to ensure a healthy population.

WHAT ABOUT RESEARCH LABS?

Most labs around the world that keep marine mammals solely for science have closed because of funding problems, said Paul Nachtigall, founder of the University of Hawaii's Marine Mammal Research Program.



In this June 8, 2017 photo, two dolphins perform at Sea Life Park in Waimanalo, Hawaii. A former U.S. Navy research whale that has contributed to groundbreaking science for the past 30 years is again making waves after being sold to the marine amusement park in Hawaii. Animal-rights activists say Kina, a 13-foot-long (4-meter) false killer whale, deserves a peaceful retirement in an ocean-based refuge, but is instead being traumatized by confinement in concrete tanks at Sea Life Park. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

His sea pens where Kina lived at the university were among them. It cost nearly \$1 million a year to keep three animals at the lab.

Scientists agree most captive whales wouldn't survive if released into the wild.

Keiko, the orca that starred as Willy in the 1993 blockbuster "Free Willy," is an example of the difficulty involved in releasing captive animals. In the film, a boy helps set the captive whale free. But in real life, Keiko was rescued after the movie because of an outcry over his conditions at a Mexico park. The whale eventually was released into the wild but died a short time later.

WHAT ARE OCEAN SANCTUARIES?



In this June 8, 2017 photo, Kina, a false killer whale, works with trainer Jeff Pawloski at Sea Life Park in Waimanalo, Hawaii. The former U.S. Navy research whale that has contributed to groundbreaking science for the past 30 years is again making waves after being sold to a marine amusement park in Hawaii. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

Animal-rights activists are proposing establishing refuges for retiring show animals by netting off large areas of coastal ocean.

The sanctuaries would be much larger and deeper than tanks and pools at family attractions, though the animals would still require constant care. Advocates say the refuges would employ trained staff similar to those at marine parks.

ARE ANY IN THE WORKS?

Yes. A group called The Whale Sanctuary Project is raising money and hopes to open a sea sanctuary in the coming years.



In this March 3, 1980 file photo, a hawk circles over net pens full of dolphins awaiting slaughter on Iki Island, Japan. Fishermen killed most of the animals and turned them into fertilizer for free distribution, but some were captured and sold to marine amusement parks. One of those animals, Kina, contributed to groundbreaking science for the past 30 years and is again making waves after being sold to a marine park in Hawaii. (AP Photo/Sadayuji Mikami, File)

Project organizers started with about 100 possible sanctuary sites and have narrowed that to 20 locations in British Columbia, Nova Scotia and Washington state. They will begin pursuing permits for two or three promising locations next year, President Lori Marino said.

The refuge will publish observational data on its whales and dolphins but will not allow in-depth, invasive research on them, Marino said.

Meanwhile, the National Aquarium in Baltimore last year announced it will retire its dolphins into a "pioneering" ocean pen by 2020.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals welcomed the news, and the CEO of the Humane Society of the United States blogged that the head of the aquarium "has done something terribly important."

"There's no model anywhere that we're aware of for this," aquarium CEO John Racanelli told The Associated Press in an interview ahead of the announcement. "We're pioneering here, and we know it's neither the easiest nor the cheapest option."



In this June 14, 2017 photo, Paul Nachtigall, founder of the Marine Mammal Research Center at the University of Hawaii, talks with The Associated Press at

the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology on Coconut Island near Kaneohe, Hawaii. A marine mammal that has contributed to groundbreaking science for the past 30 years, much of it under Nachtigall's supervision, is again making waves after being sold to a marine amusement park in Hawaii. Kina is a false killer whale, a large member of the dolphin family. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

WOULD THEY WORK?

Nachtigall says sanctuaries are a great idea, but he worries they'll face the same money problems his research program experienced.

The animals need quality food, veterinary care and stimulation, which requires a large staff and expensive infrastructure.

"If you're going to care for the animals the best way you can, you have to have the funding to do it," he said. "The best way to bring in funding consistently is to have a paying public."



In this May 13, 2017 photo, an activist holds a sign during a protest outside Sea Life Park in Waimanalo, Hawaii. A former U.S. Navy research whale that has contributed to groundbreaking science for the past 30 years is again making waves after being sold to a marine amusement park in Hawaii. Animal-rights activists say Kina, a false killer whale, deserves a peaceful retirement in an ocean-based refuge, but is instead being traumatized by confinement in concrete tanks at Sea Life Park. But Kina's former Navy trainer and a longtime marine mammal researcher say no such sea sanctuaries exist, and the park is the best place for the 40-year-old toothy cetacean. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

Marino believes a shift in thinking—and funding—could be the answer. She says her project, which was incorporated last year, has raised about \$1 million of the \$20 million needed to get off the ground. Continued funding of about \$2 million per year would come from donors and public education programs.

If marine parks collaborated with sanctuary creators, she says, more dolphins and whales could be swimming in the ocean. "I think there are people in the captivity community that want to see this happen."



In this May 9, 2017, photo, Kina, a 40-year-old false killer whale, works with trainer Jeff Pawloski at Sea Life Park in Waimanalo, Hawaii. The former U.S. Navy research whale that has contributed to groundbreaking science for the past 30 years is again making waves after being sold to the marine amusement park in Hawaii. Animal-rights activists say Kina deserves a peaceful retirement in an ocean-based refuge, but is instead being traumatized by confinement in concrete tanks. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

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