



Participants in Dolphin Encounter "get acquainted" with mammal, above; swim with them, lower left; trainer cuddles dolphin at mammal lab in Honolulu.

The Flipper Flap

Are Close Encounters With Captive Dolphins
Just Another New Rage, or Are They an Outrage?

By LYNN SMITH,
Times Staff Writer

WAIKOLOA, Hawaii—On Cheryl Burton's list of fantasy adventures, swimming with dolphins ranked somewhere between visiting Angkor Wat and making love among the pyramids.

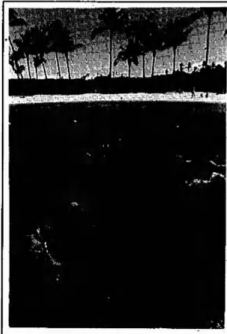
But after two weeks at the Hyatt Regency Waikoloa, Burton still had not been picked for the hotel's daily Dolphin Encounter, a 30-minute experience in which a half dozen guests are allowed to join six captive dolphins in the Hyatt's lagoon. So Burton became more methodical in her quest to have her name drawn in the hotel's daily Dolphin Encounter Lottery, from which approximately 30 guests a day are selected to swim with the hotel dolphins.

The 33-year-old San Francisco financial marketer admits she tried offering \$250 bribes to hotel employees and lottery winners, and was ready to go up to \$500. But then a winner didn't show, and Burton found herself in the lagoon, nuzzling a 300-pound animal with a permanent grin.

Eager, Sometimes Desperate

Burton is just one of thousands of dolphin enthusiasts flocking to the Hyatt's Dolphin Quest Program and to other centers in Florida, eager, sometimes desperate, to swim with dolphins for reasons ranging from the desire for an unusual vacation to a search for self-improvement and spiritual awareness.

As a result of the Hyatt's success, resort hotels from Las Vegas to Washington, D.C., are scrambling to open their own dolphin lagoons.



GAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times

But as fascination with the legendary, large-brained mammals continues to grow, so does the controversy over whether such encounters are good for either the dolphins or people, and whether they should be allowed at all.

A federal agency that handles marine-mammal permits is investigating the deaths of two dolphins at the Hyatt's; there are unconfirmed reports of injuries elsewhere, and

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—George Creamore

some experts have warned that diseases could be transferred back and forth between the swimmer and the dolphin.

Environmentalists complain that such swim-with-dolphin programs remove the highly social dolphins from their diminishing families and force them to interact with humans as a merchandising tool.

All this, they say, is contrary to the purpose of the federal Marine

Mammal Protection Act, which requires bona fide educational benefits from the capture and display of dolphins.

"Our major concern with the swim-with programs is that they are proliferating to facilities that are not educational facilities. They are hotels," said Lesley Scheele, small cetaceans coordinator for Greenpeace International, based in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.

Captive dolphins do not breed well, Scheele said, adding that the continued capture and exploitation of the water-dwelling mammals could seriously impact their populations at sea.

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Responding to complaints as well as the growing number of requests to operate dolphin swim centers, the National Marine Fisheries Service now is scrutinizing the programs run by Dolphin Quest and three other facilities. Those concerns also have prompted the agency to review provisions of the 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act for the first time in 16 years.

The service will decide by the end of the year whether or how to further regulate existing dolphin display or swim permits, which expire Dec. 31.

The Dolphin Quest program at the Hyatt, a fantasy-themed hotel on the Kohala coast, is the latest and perhaps most successful use of dolphins as a tourist attraction.

When the hotel opened last November, the half-hour, \$55 dolphin encounters were booked three months in advance by guests who were making their hotel reserva-

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 tions around the dolphins' availability. Management switched to a first-come, first-served system with 48 hours' notice, but dolphin encounter slots were usually booked 20 minutes after telephone lines opened. Eventually, the lottery system was installed for applicants, who include islanders and guests of neighboring hotels.

"Every hotel in Hawaii wants to put a dolphin in the swimming pool for their guests," said Georgia Cranmore, an ecologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service.

In addition to the Hyatt, the service has issued permits to Dolphins Plus, Dolphin Research Center and Theater of the Sea in the Florida Keys. Another, the Zoovet Center, operates a swim program at Hawk's Cay Resort in Florida while its permit is pending. And outside U.S. jurisdiction, the Dolphin Experience (INTEX) (International Underwater Explorers Society) on Grand Bahama Island also operates a dolphin swim program.

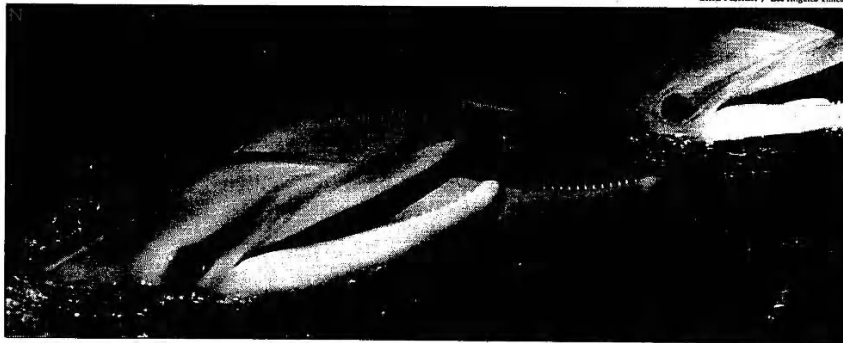
Meanwhile, the federal government is investigating as yet unconfirmed reports of injuries to humans in the swim-with-dolphin lagoons, as well as the cleanliness of the pools and the propriety of flying dolphins thousands of miles to be used for encounters.

The eight Atlantic bottlenose dolphins in the Hyatt lagoon were captured in the Gulf of Mexico by Dolphin Quest operators, who trained them to accept petting as well as fish as rewards for good behavior before flying them to Hawaii.

Of the dozens of species of dolphins, Atlantic bottlenose are preferred because they do not migrate and are more comfortable in shallow waters, unlike the Pacific bottlenose and spinner dolphins native to the seas in the Hawaiian Islands, said Rae Stone, Dolphin Quest owner and veterinarian.

Trainers insist the dolphins are not forced to interact with humans. If the captive dolphins didn't like being petted and played with by strangers all day long, "they wouldn't do it." Dolphin Quest training manager Jo Hay said. There is a free zone in the 35,000-square-foot lagoon where people are not allowed, but the dolphins choose not to use it, she said. Security guards watch the lagoon 24 hours a day to prevent people from jumping in with them.

Still, if dolphins do not voluntarily swim from their holding tank to



Atlantic bottlenose dolphins line up playfully, ready to have an "encounter" with participants at Hyatt Regency lagoon in Hawaii.

the open lagoon where humans are waiting for them, a net is used to force them out. "They are like children. They'll test you like saying, 'Do I really have to do this?'"

She says, "Yes, you do." Stone said. "Once they're out in the open lagoon, it is totally voluntary," she said. "They're not fed during that portion."

(Trainers at the Dolphin Experience in the Grand Bahamas and Dolphins Plus in Key Largo, Fla., said they allow some dolphins to leave their pens every day for the open ocean. Territorial and aware of their food source, they always return, spokesmen said. The dolphins at the Hyatt also have been exposed to the open sea, which is connected to the lagoon, but showed no interest, according to trainers.)

Once in the Hyatt lagoon with humans, Stone said, dolphins are protected in a variety of ways: required life vests prevent swimmers from chasing the dolphins, and dorsal fin "rides" are forbidden. Swimmers are told not to touch the dolphins' blowholes. They are encouraged to stroke the dolphins' skins, and to act enthusiastically if they want the dolphins to play with them with hoops and balls.

Stone insists that Dolphin Quest, which raises research funds and holds field trips for local school children, is more educational than entertaining and helps create future conservationists by hands-on contact with the mammals. Spokesmen for Greenpeace, Hawaii and the West Hawaii Humane

Society agree that the program is well run.

But ecologist Cranmore said, "Obviously a hotel can never primarily provide marine mammal education; let's face it."

On two separate mornings in March and April, Dolphin Quest trainers were shocked to discover two previously healthy dolphins dead at the bottom of the 20-foot-deep lagoon.

Veterinarian-owners Stone and Jay Sweeney performed a necropsy, concluding that the dolphins died as a result of eating Hawaiian reef fish that swam into the lagoon. The reef fish apparently had been poisoned by algae growing along the Kona coast, a common problem, state health officials said.

"It's unfortunate these two animals were eating on the side," said Hokama Yoshitaki, an independent investigator and professor of pathology at the University of Hawaii who still is trying to pinpoint the precise botulinus responsible.

"The thing that disturbs me is this: Whatever you feed can be recycled. After all, they have to go to the bathroom, and you had eight of them. They may be internally polluting themselves and the algae may be picking it up."

After the deaths, the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives asked the Fisheries Service to suspend the Dolphin Quest permit.

"However, at the moment, we don't have any indication the deaths were related to the swim program," Cranmore said.

Some also worry about whether human swimmers and dolphins may transmit diseases to one another.

Dolphin Quest owner-veterinarian Sweeney has written in published journals that humans are susceptible to a bacterial skin disease known as "fish handler's disease" that may enter the body through small cuts or abrasions. While it commonly runs its course within a few weeks, the bacteria occasionally spreads to the heart, where it can cause a life-threatening disease called endocarditis, according to Sweeney.

Laboratory tests also have shown wheezing and coughing dolphins to be infected with human viruses, he said. While such infection is rare, "It also leaves open the reverse potential of human infection back from the affected dolphins," he said.

So far, no cases of human infection have been reported from the swim programs, Cranmore said.

But Cranmore said her office also has received a few "fairly frightening" letters from people who have had dolphin encounters in swim-with programs. One from an experienced diver complained of what Cranmore called a "well-known fact"—the "oversexed nature of [male] bottlenose dolphins," particularly regarding female humans.

The diver, Kathleen J. Forti of Virginia Beach, Va., said in her letter that she experienced "nothing short of dolphin rape and exploitation" while swimming at Dolphins Plus in Key Largo in May, 1988. "No sooner did I get in the

water than a dolphin came up behind me, grabbed my leg and started shaking forcefully. . . . I thought I was under some kind of attack. I saw to my astonishment that it was a male dolphin and he was trying to mate. . . . "One woman was so upset she tried to get out of the water only to have the dolphin grab her scuba fin and try pulling her back in," Forti wrote.

Dolphins Plus co-owner Lloyd Borguss said it is impossible for a dolphin to pull a swimmer into a pool by grabbing a fin, but that amorous interest on the part of dolphins toward people is not uncommon.

"Dolphins and humans are the only two species [that] use sex for pleasure and procreation. They do not mate only when they're in heat. The male dolphin can get amorous at any time, toward anything."

Despite the lingering health and safety questions, dolphin program operators say they could easily sell \$40-\$50 half-hour slots for hundreds of dollars each to enthusiastic swimmers—who include participants in healing, communication or self-improvement workshops.

In recent months, proposals have been made for a dolphin lagoon at The Mirage, a hotel now under construction in Las Vegas, and for two projects still in the planning stages—"Desert Dolphins," a 40-acre health resort in Tucson, Ariz., and "Dolphin America" in Washington.

Mirage Director of Marine Operations Julie Onie said the dolphin department of the 3,050-room, tropical-theme Las Vegas hotel is

seeking six already-captive Atlantic bottlenose dolphins for a proposed free-form, artificial salt water lagoon that would allow underwater viewing, but no swimming.

The government has not given a permit for the facility, which is scheduled to open Dec. 1.

Dolphin America, a "splashy" 200-room hotel complex with a dolphin museum, would feature dolphins on display only, said Doug Michels, 45, a Washington-based architect for clients who are considering two sites on Massachusetts Avenue between the convention center and Union Station.

The project would encourage "creative communication" efforts with the dolphins, Michels said. While he opposes permanent captivity of dolphins, he said, "Once we get it going and communication established, only volunteer dolphins will be used." He explained that psychics would ask the dolphins "to come to the hotel and 'They would come up the Potomac River and meet us in the Tidal Basin.'"

A decade ago, Michels acknowledged that the average person might respond to his idea by saying "Look up!" Today, he said, he is finding much more understanding.

However, Mary Caroline Meadows, 48, therapist who advocates using living dolphins in meditation achieved through deep breath work a hostile reception in Carefree, Ariz., where she first pitched "Desert Dolphins"—her dream of a rejuvenating center for captive dolphins and sick humans, that she said came to her in a vision while she was deep breathing.

"A lot of people were really upset about it," said Diana Stockell, of the Carefree Chamber of Commerce. "They felt dolphins had no place in the desert."

Meadows instead took her dream to Tucson where, with the help of private financial backers, she said she would break ground this year for a multimillion-dollar resort that will include human underwater birthing with dolphin "midwives." Meadows said some people believe the dolphins can communicate to newborns and mothers are more relaxed with a dolphin in the water.

Mike Schultz, a trainer at Dolphin Experience in the Bahamas, said he keeps an open mind about whether dolphin can communicate telepathically.

"The Dolphin Experience would have a lot of gain if what they say is true," he said. "We have, at the moment, \$20,000 in future bookings."

DAIL FISHER / Los Angeles Times