

Criticism drowns proposed dolphin exhibit

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Public criticism has killed a proposal for a dolphin exhibit at South Seas Plantation resort on Captiva Island in Lee County, a resort official announced Monday.

The proposal by Jay Sweeney, a marine mammal veterinarian from California, called for the capture of eight bottle-nosed dolphins from the Gulf of Mexico off Florida's west coast.

Allen Ten Broek, president of the Mariner Group, owner of South Seas, said at a press conference Monday that resort offi-

cialists have decided not to review Sweeney's proposal any further because of public complaints.

"The public is not desirous of having this and South Seas is not desirous of having something with so much controversy surrounding it," Ten Broek said. "I'm not going to attempt to change the public's mind."

Ten Broek said the dolphin exhibit would have been open only to guests and social members of the exclusive resort, so that concerns about increased traffic on Sanibel and Captiva islands were unwarranted. He said there also has been concern about the dolphins being confined to small pens, when

in fact they would have been kept inside a fenced, 200-by-75-foot pen in Pine Island Sound.

"This proposal has some merit," Ten Broek said. Renowned researchers would have studied the dolphins, he said, and the South Seas center would have been a place to bring ailing marine mammals found in Southwest Florida.

Sweeney, who lives in San Diego, could not be reached for comment Monday. He said earlier this month that he initially wanted to capture no more than six dolphins for the private exhibit proposed for South Seas. He said he selected South Seas because

of the resort's ability to exhibit dolphins in "an open and natural environment."

Sweeney, who in the past 17 years has netted more than 30 dolphins from the Gulf for public displays around the world, has said the capture doesn't hurt the mammals.

Bob Ziobro, a biologist at the National Marine Fisheries Service in Washington, D.C., said Monday's rejection by South Seas will prompt the agency to stop its review of Sweeney's application for a permit to capture the dolphins. Ziobro said it's possible that Sweeney could find another place to exhibit dolphins in Southwest Florida, but the veterinarian would need to submit a new

application to the fisheries service.

Ziobro said he has received about 10 letters of complaint from Southwest Florida residents.

"Unless the animals are being taken for a specific facility, we can't issue a permit in anticipation," Ziobro said. He said it would take about three months to review a new application.

Ziobro said dolphins are not considered an endangered species and there are 339 in captivity at public displays in the United States. He said

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the closest public displays to Fort Myers are at the Miami Seaquarium and Busch Gardens in Tampa.

Ellie Roche, a permit specialist at the fisheries service office in St. Petersburg, said Sweeney has captured three dolphins off the west coast of Florida this year. She said two were shipped to Marineland in California and the other went to an exhibit in Switzerland. She said federal researchers have determined that 23 dolphins can be netted off Florida's west coast this year without harming their population of hundreds.

"I think he's a good, warm veterinarian," Roche said about Sweeney. "If you know about marine mammals, you know about Dr. Sweeney."

According to a fisheries service biologist, the estimated swimming range of a bottle-nosed dolphin is from 15 to 33 square miles. That fact upset some residents of Southwest Florida who believe dolphins should be allowed to swim freely and not confined to pens.

The five-member Sanibel City Council unanimously passed a resolution June 17 opposing the proposed exhibit at South Seas and sent the

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resolution to Ten Broek and the fisheries service.

"The capture, confinement and display of dolphins from the Gulf of Mexico is abhorrent to the environmental principles which the city of Sanibel and its citizens support," the resolution states.