

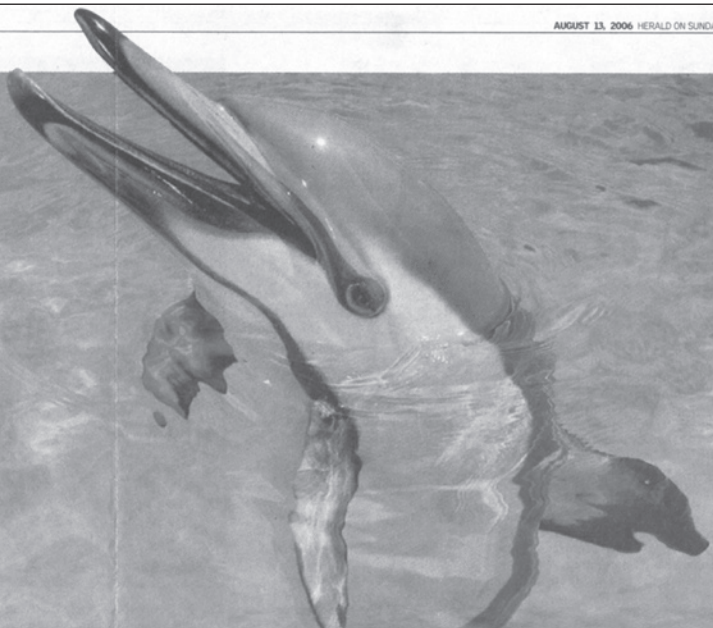
24 NEWS

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The dolphin dilemma

Since 1965, Napier's Marineland has been one of the country's most popular family attractions. But is it now time that dolphins are left in the ocean and the park confined to the scrap heap as a relic of a bygone era?

Jane Phare explores both sides of the debate.



IT'S SHAPING up as the marine war of the decade — and it's turned nasty. On one side are thousands of Hawkes Bay residents who want the right to replace the dolphins at Napier's Marineland, on the other is the vocal anti-captivity lobby who say they are appalled at the idea of keeping dolphins in pools. Caught in the spotlight is Napier

City Councillor Harry Lawson who, along with 13,588 other locals, has signed a petition which has gone to Parliament calling for Marineland to be allowed to import new dolphins.

The law allows applications to be made to import captive dolphins. Shona, 36, one of the attraction's last two common dolphins, died in April. That left Kelly, also 36, to carry

the stage on her own. Trainers know that she, too, is on borrowed time.

Kelly represents the end of an era, the last dolphin to be hunted down and caught at sea. Once she goes, says manager Gary Macdonald, Marineland's visitor numbers of 70,000 a year will drop by 80 per cent.

Lawson agrees that Marineland's future is in grave jeopardy if the park

does not get more dolphins.

He became a target and laid a complaint with the police over threatening emails and letters from some members of the anti-captivity lobby.

The subject of dolphins in captivity is emotive, with people on both sides arguing loudly and convincingly on behalf of a mammal that can't speak.

Those in favour say Marineland is the only chance many people, including children, have to see a dolphin up close and that the facility is used both to educate people and as a marine hospital. Supporters know that without the dolphin drawcard, Marineland's days could be numbered.

Opened in 1965, Marineland is in desperate need of a major makeover, in spite of an annual \$125,000 cash injection from the Napier City Council. Marineland's owner, the Napier City Council, will need some persuading before it's convinced it should apply to the Minister of Conservation for a permit to acquire more dolphins.

Applications by the council in 1995 and 2000 were turned down, but this time the application would come with the support of 13,500 locals.

Napier's mayor Barbara Arnott admits the petition will cause the council to reconsider. It would wait to hear the Government's response to the petitioners' request for funding to help house the dolphins in a decent marine facility, she said.

Marineland would need to be completely rebuilt to house the larger bottlenose dolphins, the only ones available bred in captivity. The upgrade, thought to be around \$15 million, would be "a big ask" for ratepayers, Arnott said.

But Marineland supporters question why the council can find money to rebuild Napier's National Aquarium nearby (\$8 million) but has neglected Marineland over the years.

The push to replace the dolphins

has angered those who are against keeping the mammals, whether or not the animals are born in captivity.

Conservation biologist Dr Steve Dawson, of Otago University, said putting a dolphin in a glorified swimming pool was like putting it in prison. Having studied dolphins for 20 years, he said it was a "profoundly inadequate" way to treat animals which were very social and sophisticated. "These animals live lives that are as complicated as any of our soap operas."

The fact that Napier's last two dolphins lived long lives in captivity was a lame argument, he said. "People live for a long time in prisons, too."

Dolphins displayed all of the behaviours that humans exhibited when held captive — repetitive behaviour, hyper aggression, exaggerated homosexuality. "They've got nothing else to do."

He conceded that transferring dolphins in captivity was better than catching them in the wild but thought the motives had more to do with money than education, and he had yet to see a dolphin marine facility with a decent education programme.

He questioned whether those who signed the petition knew the implications for dolphins kept in captivity.

"If you have a bunch of people who are signing the petition out of ignorance, then the petition doesn't really mean very much."

In the meantime, Marineland is fighting for survival.

In a marine time warp the pools, grandstand and dolphins of today are the same as in the late 60s and 70s, minus Shona.

The final decision to allow a permit to keep dolphins rests with the Minister of Conservation, who takes advice from the Department of Conservation. Lawson hopes the petition, presented to Parliament last month, will carry some clout.

The 'sick culture' of captivity

By Jane Phare

VICKI BAKER, a former dolphin trainer who says she's appalled at the number of dolphins who have died at Marineland in its 40-year history, has spoken out about the "sick culture" of keeping the mammals in captivity.

Baker, who worked as a Marineland trainer for two years in the early 1980s, quit in protest over the treatment of the dolphins.

Baker was disturbed at training

methods used when she worked at Marineland. Dolphins who did not perform correctly at shows were not rewarded with fish, and as a result, some of them went without food for three days.

Marineland manager Gary Macdonald disputed this saying, "If they performed badly, they didn't get a feed. But not for three days."

Nowadays, he said, training was done by "random reinforcement", using fish, verbal praise and touch as rewards.

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Phare, Jane. 'The Dolphin Dilemma' and 'The Sick Culture of Captivity', published 2006, *Herald on Sunday*, reproduced with permission of PMCA.