

Dolphins — the flipside of fun

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THINK Napier — think dolphins; for 30 years the sleek-bodied acrobats have been drawing tourists to the seaside resort. But now their place as the city's number one attraction is under threat.

Two of the performing quartet are bordering on geriatric and suggestions that Marineland may import captive bred dolphins from the United States to replace them have sent outraged conservationists into overdrive.

But the importation bid is the last hope for the dolphins at Marineland.

The centre has been refused rights to capture from the wild and failure to import captive bred animals will spell the end of the country's only dolphinarium.

In the meantime, ever optimistic city officials are pushing ahead with plans for a multi-million dollar project to bring together the waterfront attractions of the Marineland, Aquarium and Kiwhouse under one roof.

Caught in a catch-22, the dolphin enclosure must be upgraded if more animals are to be imported and one scenario for the complex includes a \$3 million seascape dolphin pool. But it becomes an expensive home for seals if the application fails. Marineland manager Gary Macdonald admits the future of the dolphins is a major dilemma.

"There's no doubt about the fact dolphins are the main pull for people to come in here and if we didn't have dolphins, we certainly wouldn't get as many people coming through the gates to see the seals and the sealions."

And there is no denying the charm of the centre's star performers who woo crowds of thousands during the summer months.

Shona (25) and Kelly (24) have been going through their paces for 20 years since they were captured from the seas around Napier. Both are defying the statistics which

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CLAIRE GUYAN reports on the growing controversy over performing dolphins

deem a common dolphin's life span to be 20 years. The elderly couple were joined eight years ago by Selina and Cassana both aged 11 — the last dolphins to be caught from the wild in New Zealand.

Mr Macdonald, too, is a Marineland old-timer. He joined as a trainer 23 years ago and has locked horns regularly with conservationists ever since.

A consortium of Project Jonah, Greenpeace, the World Wide Fund for Nature, Forest and Bird Protection Society and the SPCA is planning a major campaign over summer in a bid to quash Marineland's planned application for an importation licence.

And it is planning to make a submission to Conservation Minister Denis Marshall to outlaw the keeping of whales and dolphins in captivity in New Zealand.

Coalition spokeswoman Tanya Jones says they will fight any attempt by Marineland to import dolphins, although they are happy for the current occupants to live out their lives at the centre.

"We want them to look at alternatives to having dolphins in captivity. There is evidence that it is very stressful for the animals."

The consortium is keen to see Marineland become more of an education centre using films and pictures of dolphins — rather than keeping the animals in captivity.

Ms Jones says the only place dolphins should be seen is in the wild and there are plenty of opportunities on organised tours.

Department of Conservation Deputy Director General Murray



DILEMMA . . . Macdonald with two of his charges

Hosking will not prejudice the situation but says any application from Marineland would be considered carefully.

"We have to take each case on its merits and evaluate it against a range of technical criteria."

Mr Macdonald says they always knew the acquisition of dolphins in the future would be a problem.

As a result, he says, they have considered other options.

"If one of the scenarios is that there are not going to be any dolphins, then in conjunction with the other displays, there is still a very viable attraction."

The proposal for a major revamp of the Marine Parade complexes have been on the drawing board for years.

The project is being driven by Destination Napier, a commercial arm of the local city council set up to control the waterfront attractions.

Manager Kit Nixon says they are still working through feasibility



JUMPING FOR JOY? . . . change

studies and hope to put the various options for the complex to the public in the New Year.

He won't be drawn into the debate on the dolphins and says their importance will have to be decided by the public.

"We have to find the answer — how important are dolphins to Napier? But it's a question we have to ask the public. I don't believe we are in any kind of position to make that decision," he says.

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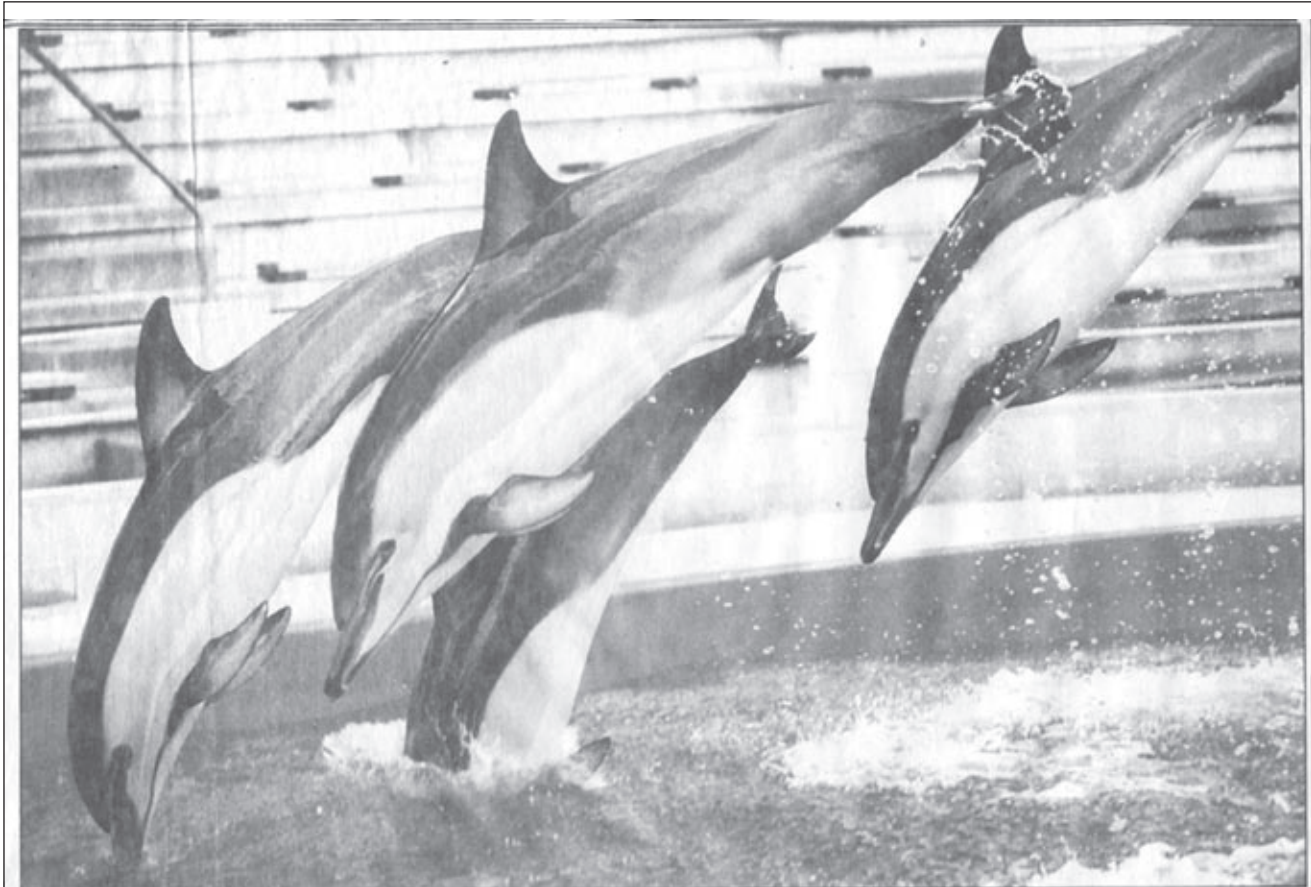
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JUMPING FOR JOY? . . . changing attitudes could spell the end for Marineland's performing dolphins

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He says a tentative date of 1996 had been set down for the start of construction but, "obviously the new pool is not going to go ahead unless there are some guarantees

that we can stock the thing. "My one fervent hope is that Shona and Kelly live long enough to actually see the new pool. That would be delightful, but whether that's a reality or not is another matter at this stage."

Marineland has long been the target of conservationists who, over the years, have seized upon its bad record of dolphins deaths.

Of the 75 dolphins acquired by the centre since 1965, 56 have died, 13 have been released and two sent to Taronga Zoo, Sydney.

Half the deaths were within the first five years, 90% in the first 10 years. Since 1983, three have died.

The last was in 1989 when Katie, who had been with the centre for 14 years, died of renal breakdown, attributed aging.

Mr Macdonald admits the record doesn't look good.

"In the early years, the animals simply didn't survive as well and that's the reality of it." Since then, the record has improved and he

now proudly points to the fact two of the centre's dolphins are frolicking well into their old age.

But the publicity took its toll and when Mr Macdonald was employed as manager three years ago, his brief was to turn around the centre's declining popularity and gate takings.

He started with a round of redundancies and then launched a new venture allowing tourists to swim with the dolphins.

It has been a huge hit, despite concern from conservationists, and the centre recorded a profit for the first time in the last financial year.

Attendances are also increasing by 10 to 15% a year — and this year the dolphins can expect to entertain 75,000 guests.

Mr Macdonald says it shows there is still a place for Marineland, despite a change of mood around the world.

A number of countries including Britain, Brazil and all Australian states, except Queensland, now ban

the keeping of dolphins in captivity, adding weight to the argument the mammals should only be seen in the wild in New Zealand.

But Mr Macdonald is not convinced. "To me that is an extremely elitist argument. An argument for the rich and wealthy. How many New Zealand families could afford to go out to watch the whales and dolphins in Kaikoura? Not many. But the same families can afford to come here."

But what about the dolphins? Do they actually enjoy performing stunts for the public or sharing their pool with tourists keen to swim alongside?

"That is always a very tricky emotional one — where do you get off? Does a cabbage like being eaten?" says Mr Macdonald. "I don't think the animals are unhappy," Mr Macdonald says. "They are very well cared for and I don't think Shona and Kelly would be 20 years at Marineland if they were stressed or unhappy."

