

Empty The Tanks 2017, May 13th at Mystic Aquarium!

By Olga Pristin

It's not often that you will see an invitation to an aquarium in "Whales Alive!" But May 13th is the day when we want to see as many people as possible at Mystic Aquarium in CT. No, we don't invite you to visit an Arctic Exhibit, to "paint with belugas" or have "pancakes with penguins". On May 13th, we will be standing outside the Aquarium, at 55 Coogan Blvd., Mystic, CT 06355 holding signs and giving away flyers from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., as we did for the past two years as part of the Empty the Tanks global awareness campaign.

This worldwide peaceful protest, created for bringing attention to the plight of captive cetaceans, potentially targets every marine park that keeps whales or dolphins. Started by Rachel Carbary in 2013 after her trip to Taiji, it is not affiliated with an organization. Empty the Tanks is not a radical movement, but a peaceful educational event that sends a clear message to the industry while at the same time raising public awareness about the issue of captivity of cetaceans in the most positive manner. During past events, we gathered a crowd as diverse as it gets – kids as young as 7, teenagers and college students, adults of all ages, all from different backgrounds and professions. We all had one thing in common: the firm belief that whales and dolphins do not belong in tanks.

We don't want Mystic Aquarium to fail; we want it to change. When captive marine mammal displays started many decades ago we didn't know what we know now; decades of studying whales and dolphins both in captivity and in the wild revealed so many



Photo: John Flaherty

facts about them that we weren't aware of when the first marine parks opened their doors to the public. There is still much to learn, but we know now that these animals possess a level of intelligence, awareness, and psychological and emotional sensitivity that makes it unacceptable to continue keeping them in captivity.

We know now that captivity harms cetaceans in numerous ways. The physical constraints of the artificial enclosures (regardless of how natural they may appear to us) not only prevent these free

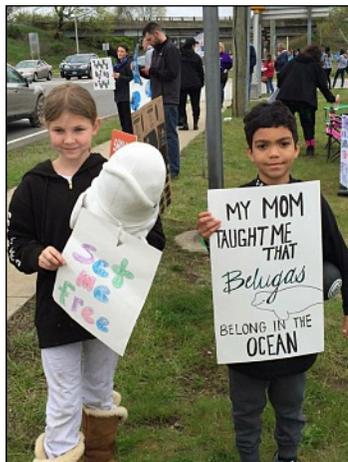


Photo: John Flaherty

ranging mammals from swimming distances they would cover in the wild and getting adequate exercise, but also impact social relationships, cause boredom produced by a relatively sterile and unchanging environment, induce frustration, stress, and eventually

stress-related health problems and deaths.

Stress derives from many aspects of captivity. Seeing social isolation and deprivation of natural social relationships in captivity breaks my heart every time I see footage from a marine park. I am lucky to have seen dolphins, orcas, and beluga whales in the wild, and every time it's bittersweet; I feel a mix of joy seeing families swimming together, but pain for those deprived of something so beautiful, natural, and the most



CSI Director Bill Rossiter with other protesters at 2016 Empty the Tanks; Photo: John Flaherty

important for whales – their families. Cetaceans are not merely gregarious; they form complex social societies with their own languages and their own cultures, as well as long-lasting relationships, established friendships, and companionships. Captivity takes it all away, and for me, this is the cruelest aspect of captivity. Mystic Aquarium has a long history of housing beluga whales and dolphins. While they have shown different cetacean species, including a pilot whale and Commerson's dolphin, the aquarium is best known since the 1970's for its belugas. I have a soft spot for belugas. There is no other whale as friendly and curious as a beluga. They've got a twinkle in their eyes and Mona Lisa smiles. With their bulbous heads, they look more like dolphins in football helmets. No wonder belugas became and remain the main attraction and the face of the aquarium, but each one has paid a price to entertain Mystic's visitors.

Beluga whales currently on display in the US were either caught from the wild, or captive-bred. The general public is not aware that most belugas that Mystic has housed were wild caught whales, and for many people who stopped by to talk to us at Empty the Tanks, this was the most shocking revelation about the Aquarium.

This past summer, I traveled to the place where most belugas were captured for the US parks: Churchill, Manitoba. Kela, the only living whale that Mystic owns, was captured right there. The site of the capture operations is still there, deserted and haunting. I lingered for a while there just trying to imagine all the horrors this place has witnessed.



The site of capture operations in Churchill, Manitoba; Photo: Dmitri Pristin

From this site, you can see the mouth of the Churchill river where it opens into the Hudson Bay, and you can see the white backs of the whales from every vantage point. To the newly arrived tourist, they look like white caps out in the harbor until someone points out that those are whales. When you are out in a kayak, they will come close to you and look you right in the eyes, melting your heart with the trust that people have betrayed so many times.

Every year, some 57,000 beluga whales descend into the western side of the Hudson Bay - 27,000 in the Churchill River estuary alone. Those are extraordinary figures in this age, when

belugas are threatened in places such as the east side of Hudson Bay, and the St. Lawrence River where they are contaminated by industrial effluents.

The annual summer gathering near Churchill may be the largest concentration of beluga whales anywhere. No wonder that for decades, Churchill was the center of the whaling industry and whale-hunting tourism until the late 60s.



Photo: Dmitry Pristin



Photo: Olga Pristin

When hunting in this area stopped in 1967, whale hunters began capturing belugas for zoos and aquariums around the world. A handful were captured each year - about 65 in total between 1967 and 1992. No one cared about the impact of the family groups traumatized by the capture operations. Most

belugas that Mystic has housed had been captured from here; all but one have died.

A few years ago another 18 wild belugas lost their freedom. They were captured off the coast of Russia for Georgia Aquarium, originally to be divided between several facilities, Mystic included. The freedoms they once enjoyed - to traverse the oceans with their families; to socialize with whomever they chose; to live their lives as they wish had been stolen from them, potentially forever. Had Georgia Aquarium's permit been approved by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) the consequences would have set back progress achieved with great effort by CSI and like-minded NGOs. The last import of wild caught cetaceans to the US happened more than two decades ago. Re-opening the door would have prompted more imports and increased the already insane Russian captures.

The Federal Court ruling to uphold the NMFS decision to deny the import permit of the 18 belugas, along with the NMFS ruling to designate the Amur-Sakhalin stock of belugas as depleted, closed the US market for importing any whales that carry the DNA of this population of Russian belugas. The fate of these 18 individuals (or less, as at least one of them likely died) still owned by Georgia Aquarium and still at the pens in the Black Sea, is grim, and sadly there is not much that can be done to help these animals. With a heavy heart, I admit that in a way we "sacrificed" them so that other captures wouldn't happen, and so that fewer whales would lose their freedom and their lives. With the markets for captive cetaceans growing in Russia, China, and Japan, removing the US as a potential customer is a huge win for cetaceans.

I am very proud to have recently joined CSI, the organization that, along with Animal Welfare Institute, Earth Island Institute, and Whale and Dolphin Conservation was on the front lines of this long battle, submitting substantive comments and testifying in court against Georgia Aquarium, and filing a petition that



Beluga whales captured and held in tanks in Russia

resulted in the listing of Sakhalin-Amur population of belugas as depleted.

Of course ETT is for all captive cetaceans, not just belugas. Much has happened since the last ETT. Two of the most iconic orcas died within weeks of each other: Tilikum, who became the symbol of problems at SeaWorld, and Granny, the oldest known wild orca, who could have been anything between 80 and 105. Over the past year, we saw many more deaths at different marine parks, including the only two belugas at Vancouver Aquarium, followed by the Vancouver Park Board's decision to change its bylaws to end the display of live cetaceans at the Aquarium. Mystic as well had its own tragedy - the passing of Miki, a young male on a breeding loan from Shedd Aquarium, who died at the age of nine last August.

CSI and other NGOs are supporting legislation to force marine parks to make changes. We are changing public attitudes about captive cetaceans, raising public knowledge, awareness and concern. Convincing ticket buyers that the entertainment is not worth the cost caused declining attendance and diminishing profits, the reasons SeaWorld ended their orca breeding program. With ground already broken by decades of hard work, and a whole new level of awareness that "Death at Sea World" and "Blackfish" brought, we just need to keep walking the walk, pushing new legislation, and educating the general public. We want Sea World to stop breeding cetaceans, period. The same for the belugas at Mystic. We have reasons to be hopeful. The documentary "Born to be free," featuring the 18 captured Russian belugas, was released this March in Russia and will be available everywhere later this year. Three years of fearless journalistic investigation brings to light the plight of these poor creatures who were trapped for our entertainment. It can do the same for belugas that "Blackfish" did for orcas.

So, how do we "empty the tanks?" We don't want to take the whales from their tanks, dump them in the ocean, and wave goodbye. "Empty the Tanks" is a catchy slogan, and this is what we want to see - the empty tanks, but not now, and not soon. We know that while some cetaceans could be rehabilitated and released, many could not survive on their own in the wild and would have to stay in human care for the rest of their lives. We want to start a dialogue. We want to see the willingness from the industry to end the era of having whales and dolphins on display. We want them to start phasing out their whale and dolphin exhibits, and make sure the current population of captive whales will be the last one. They need to stop breeding and attempting to import more whales. They need to consider the needs of whales that are currently in their care. As most cetaceans cannot be released in the wild we should thoroughly consider all the possible alternatives. Google the Whale Sanctuary Project for progress being made towards giving ex-captive cetaceans real seaside sanctuaries for rehabilitation and lifetime support.



Photo: John Flaherty

"Be the change you wish to see in the world." This famous quote by Gandhi is true for every person that puts one's energy and one's time to a good cause. So, before May 13th comes, please tell as many people as you can about Empty the Tanks, and on

any other day of the year, please share the information about what captivity means for cetaceans. People listen. The past two years at Mystic, we had our share of angry shouts and middle fingers pointed at us, but we also had many cars honking in support, and people who stopped to ask questions, some with initial skepticism, some sympathetic. We need this dialogue and we need to persuade people to dig deeper; when everyone does, that's when hope becomes reality. "Research, reflect, decide for yourself" says the sign the little boy is holding. If we all did just that, I could not have asked for more.

See you all at Mystic!