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(COP) to the Protocol Concerning Specially
Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPA
W) in the Wider Caribbean Region

Havana, Cuba, 24-25 September 2001

**Proposal from Netherlands Antilles
concerning the Bottle-nosed Dolphin**



MINISTER VAN
VOLKSGEZONDHEID EN
MILIEUHYGIËNE

NEDERLANDSE ANTILLEN

To The first Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC-I) to the Special Protected Area and Wildlife Protocol of the Convention for the Protection and Development of the Marine Environment of the wider Caribbean.

Uw brief van:
Uw nummer (letter):
Ons Nummer:
Onderwerp:

Willemstad,

Article 11, item 2 of the protocol provides for exemptions to the prohibitions prescribed for the protection and recovery of species listed in Annexes I and II, These exemptions can only be for scientific, educational or management purposes necessary to ensure the survival of the species or to prevent damage to forests or crops. These exemptions should be reported to the STAC to assess their pertinence.

As national authority to adopt these exemptions according to our national law implementing SPAW, I intend to adopt an exemption for the possession of Bottle-nosed Dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*), originating from the wild, for the use in interactive programmes ("swimming with dolphins") that have a considerable educational element. Conditions to this exemption will be:

- excellent and ample facilities mimicking the natural environment of the species;
- excellent veterinary and other care;
- providing opportunity to the dolphins to avoid interaction with humans;
- educational and scientific programmes.

The facility in question for this exemption is the Curaçao Sea Aquarium, for which the project proposal describing the background and available facilities, is included.

Cetaceans are an integral part of our marine environment and inspire us with awe. As such and because of the threatened status of some species and insufficient data for the others, we support their inclusion on Annex II to the protocol. However we do not regard use of this species for interactive programmes to be detrimental to the survival of the species in the wild if - through proper care and good facilities - excessive extraction from the wild will be avoided. For the vast majority of the peoples of the region and the world direct contact in the wild with this beautiful species is neither possible nor advisable. Well controlled interactive programmes can provide a better introduction to these excellent ambassadors of the marine environment, thus creating the support the species, their "kin" and the whole marine environment need.

I invite the STAC to support this exemption and at the same time provide guidelines for better practices of these programmes which are fast increasing in numbers throughout the region.

Sincerely,

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Dolphin Project for the Curaçao Sea Aquarium

Summary

This report contains detailed information, in writing and visual, for a future dolphin project on Curaçao at the Sea Aquarium. Already for several years the Curaçao Sea Aquarium is preparing for a dolphin project to expand and complete the aquarium project. All necessary facilities are ready and the operational partner for the dolphin project on Curaçao has already 4 dolphins trained for this project. A dolphin project on Curaçao would have three goals, educational, scientific and commercial. Each goal has its own value for the population of the *Tursiops truncatus* and for the island of Curaçao and her inhabitants.

Background

The Curaçao Sea Aquarium was established in 1984. The aquarium has an ‘open-water-system’, which means that clean ocean water is continuously pumped into the aquaria. The water comes directly from the ocean, without going through filters. Thus, the same natural water that surrounds the actual coral reefs outside also circulates in the aquaria. All corals and sponges in the aquarium do very well due to the plankton rich seawater.

In 1988 the Seaquarium Beach was created with bars, restaurants and shops. This high-risk venture proved very successful and has secured financially the continuity of the aquarium. The aquarium and the beach are by far the number one attraction on Curaçao, employing directly or indirectly approximately 240 people. **(See photo 1 and 2: Overview Sea Aquarium complex)**

The Sea Aquarium expanded in 1995 with the Animal Encounters Lagoon. A basin protected by breakwaters where tourists can snorkel and dive to interact with sting rays and beautiful Caribbean fish and to hand feed sharks and turtles. This basin was one of the reasons for a young marine biologist working at the Sea Aquarium to start the Marine Awareness Center (MAC). The MAC organization has snorkel clubs for children from 6 years of age and up and organizes vacation activities and special educational programs on request.

A few years later a classroom, museum and theater were added to the aquarium complex. The classroom seats 50 people and the theater can be used for groups up to 100 persons. From that time on the Sea Aquarium started with their official education department. Education plays an important role at the Curaçao Sea Aquarium. Every month many students of the local primary schools come to the Sea Aquarium for a “hands-on”, interactive lesson in marine biology to get to know the value of the underwater world. This project, started in September 1998, will give all children on Curaçao a change to visit the Sea Aquarium and to learn something about the world of Neptune!

In addition, every year a large number of student groups from international schools from Curaçao and neighboring countries come to the Sea Aquarium for special courses such as fish monitoring programs, coral & mangrove management and dive and snorkel training.

Purpose & Goal

The purpose of the Dolphin facilities at the Curaçao Sea Aquarium has commercial, educational and scientific elements.

Commercial

Although the aquarium has been a popular attraction for both locals and tourists, it has not been economically feasible by itself, mainly because of the limited local market. Due to very limited funds, the Curaçao Island Government does not financially support the Sea Aquarium but does use the facilities to promote the island. Most of the revenue to maintain the aquarium and its activities has come from the beach facilities and other commercial activities. One of the most successful enterprises by the Sea Aquarium has recently been the Animal Encounter, where visitors are able to dive and snorkel safely with all kind of marine animals like turtles, rays and sharks (behind a plexi glass window). (See photos 3, 4 and 5: **Diving in the Animal Encounters lagoon**). The interactive program with dolphins is a natural extension to the animal encounter, broadening the revenue base.

Educational

The appealing characteristics of dolphins make them an excellent species for creating awareness and concern by the public at large and by (school) children. The goals for this awareness are:

1. Understanding of the life and needs of dolphins and other cetaceans;
2. Understanding the detriment of marine pollution for dolphins;
3. Understanding the consequences of excessive hunt for the survival of cetaceans;
4. Understanding the consequences of over-fishing for dolphins and other sea animals;
5. Creating a general appreciation and awe for nature.

This awareness will generate public support, both with the local population of Curaçao as with the tourists, for maintaining the ecosystem on which dolphins depend for their survival.

Scientific

Dolphin Encounters will create facilities for cetacean research in the southern Caribbean. A monitoring of all dolphin activities will be carried out in order to better understand the dolphin population around the lower Antillean islands. This research will be used for extending the experience of dolphin encounter, but will also include research on physiology and aut-ecology of both captive and locally wild populations of *Tursiops truncatus* and possibly (wild) *Stenella* sp to be used for the management and protection of this species.

The Dolphin Encounters facilities will also become the home of the foundation for dolphin therapy, the Dutch SAM foundation and the American non-profit Upledger foundation. Extensive research will be facilitated for the understanding of the working with these forms of therapy for children with Down's syndrome, autistic children or mentally handicapped children. The SAM foundation is the only foundation in Holland offering dolphin therapy. And the Upledger Foundation, based in the United States, supports the therapeutic efforts of over 60,000 healthcare professionals worldwide. By locating it's Dolphin Assisted Therapy on Curaçao, it will be able to provide year round therapy programs, educational workshops and conduct various research projects. The worldwide exposure created by these high profile activities will help make people aware of Curaçao.

Facilities

As the Sea Aquarium is located directly on the ocean, the dolphins will be housed in a semi-natural lagoon with a width of 40 meters, a length of 80 meters and with an average depth of 4 meters. This lagoon simulates the natural environment of the dolphins, without any vertical walls and with seawater flowing in 24 hours a day through the breakwaters. There will be an average of 4 dolphins in this lagoon. According to federal standards for housing of mammals according to the latest American Laws (Ref: Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, USDA) , a lagoon with these dimensions may house a total of 64 dolphins! At the Sea Aquarium it will be a maximum of 8 dolphins. **(See photos 6, 7, 8 and 9: several views of the Dolphin lagoon)**

A small part of the lagoon will be used for the swimming with dolphins and the encounter with the dolphins. The major part will be off-limits for humans (except for the handlers, only in emergencies) so the animals are able to either retreat or voluntarily engage with visiting humans. **(See photo 10: Dolphin walkway and terrace)**

The back of the house area will consists of a modern, fully tiled, air conditioned kitchen, complete with walk-in freezer, thawing refrigerators and equipped with all stainless steel work benches and materials. **(See photo 11: walk-in freezer in the kitchen area)**

Furthermore the Dolphin Encounters will have use of two small classrooms, each seating 20 persons, the larger classroom with a seating capacity for 50 persons and the theater that seats 110 persons, all located at the Sea Aquarium. Also, the Dolphin Encounters office will have its own air conditioned classroom that can seat 75 persons. **(See photos 12 and 13: small and large classroom, photo 14: theater, photo 15: reception area Dolphin Encounters office, photos 16 and 17: classroom Dolphin Encounters)**

Planned Activities

In line with the purposes of the Dolphin Encounters project, we have planned certain activities. Most activities will combine the several purposes.

Swimming with dolphins and encounter with dolphins

The people will get an extensive briefing before meeting the dolphins. The briefing will consist out of an introductory lesson about *Tursiops truncatus*, including a video and a lesson about the do's and don'ts concerning the dolphins. Only a small group will be allowed to visit the dolphins at one time. Also the number of encounters per day will be limited.

School Programs

The educational programs about marine mammals will be integrated in the special Marine Project for the local schools. The pilot of this project was done in 1998 / 1999 and the definite project started in September 1999 with more than 20 primary schools (6-12 years) and will continue for a minimum of 5 years to give every group a chance to join the program. This means that yearly about 120 classes that will get a special marine biology lesson at their own school and the week after that will be hosted at the Sea Aquarium for some educational hours combined with 'hands-on' experience. The 'hands-on' experience involves touch tanks, snorkeling, examining dead and lives specimens as well as video, slide and book displays. These lessons will take place in the modern, fully air conditioned classroom, with a seating capacity of 50 children and view on the dolphin pool.

The Sea Aquarium educational programs are aimed at making the local school children aware of the importance of the coastal shallow water reefs and lagoons which are very vulnerable to shore pollution via sewer pipes / dumping of household garbage and disturbing of natural habitats.

During school vacation periods the education department offers all kind of marine biology activities that are both educational and entertaining for children from 4 till 18 years of age.

Next to the local students, the students of the international schools from neighboring countries that frequently visit the Sea Aquarium for special courses will be made aware of dolphins via our educational programs.

Research Activities

In coordination with Dolphin Discovery and the Upledger Institute, Dolphin Encounters will create facilities on Curaçao, next to the Sea Aquarium to house marine biologists for special research projects. The housing will be a special boat presently used in the Bahamas. The boat has a capacity to carry 75 passengers and sleep 9 people in air conditioned comfort. This boat is being used in the Bahamas to monitor the population of wild dolphins and whales. Research projects will be done in close coordination with local authorities like VOMIL (Department of Public Health and Environment) and LVV (Island Government Service for Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fisheries). Although paying passengers can come along to make the endeavor feasible, there will always be marine biologists aboard and the boat will only be used to study passing dolphin pods along the coast of Curaçao.

Dolphin Therapy

The dolphins will be at the disposal of the SAM Foundation and the Upledger Institute for dolphin therapy. For these therapies the dolphins do not have to interact with the patients. The therapy will be conducted in a small part of the dolphin pool and the dolphins are free to choose to interact or not with the patients. Next to the dolphin therapy, the SAM Foundation and the Upledger Institute will educate local therapists in the world of dolphin therapy.

Source of Dolphins

In the first instance trained dolphins will be imported from facilities in Cancun, Mexico where our partners Dolphin Discovery presently own 28 dolphins and operate four facilities. Only after extensive research on the local (or regional) population of *Tursiops truncatus* will the possibility of acquiring them from the local stock be considered. For possible catching of wild dolphins in the future separate permits will be requested for that purpose, in accordance to our national laws and international agreements.

Partners

The Dolphin Encounters project at Curaçao will be a joint venture of Dolphin Discovery from Mexico and the Curaçao Sea Aquarium. Dolphin Discovery has the experience and the know-how of dolphin projects, being the initiator of four successful dolphin centers in Mexico. Amongst their employees they have their own veterinarians. At their research center of Dolphin Discovery they have the medical facilities to conduct the dolphin's monthly check ups. This organization is acknowledged as a leader in their field with very high standards concerning animal husbandry.

Cooperation and Alliances

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Photo 1: Curaçao Sea Aquarium complex



Photo 2: Curaçao Sea Aquarium



Photo 3: Animal Encounters



Photo 4: Animal Encounters



Photo 5: Animal Encounters



Photo 6: Dolphin Lagoon



Photo 7: Dolphin Lagoon



Photo 8: Dolphin Lagoon



Photo 9: Dolphin Lagoon



Photo 10: Walkway & terrace



Photo 11: Walk-in freezer



Photo 12: Small classroom



Photo 13: Large classroom



Photo 14: Theater



Photo 15: Reception area



Photo 16: Classroom



Photo 17: Classroom