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Dolphins have been kept in captivity for since the 1870s. The keeping of dolphins has long been a controversial issue. The main argument for keeping dolphins in captivity relates to the positive conservation message that seeing a living dolphin can create. Those who argue against dolphins in captivity highlight the inadequacy of dolphinariums to cater for the needs of these highly intelligent creatures. Today, North American dolphinariums are successfully breeding these cetaceans and are not dependent on removing them from the wild. The Dangers of Dolphin Meat

By: Kelcie Pegher

dolphin meat

Questions About Dolphin Hunting

Why Do People Hunt Dolphins?

Photos of the Dolphin Hunt

It's a fact: dolphin meat contains high levels of methylmercury. However, not all scientists agree on a simple question: is it safe to eat dolphin meat?

Why Is There Mercury in Dolphin Meat?

International studies have found high levels of mercury in dolphins. This is because dolphins are at the top of the food chain. It's like this: dolphins eat large fish, which in turn eat small fish, which feed on zooplankton, which graze on algae. Algae absorb small amounts of mercury from the aquatic environment. A single zooplankton will ingest large amounts of algae; as a result, it will contain a larger percentage of mercury than each individual algae it eats.

As one goes further up the food chain, mercury levels become more and more amplified. In addition, animals higher up the food chain tend to have higher life spans. So what started as trace amounts of mercury can add up over the 18-to-50 year life span of a dolphin. Where does the mercury come from? Mercury is released naturally from the ground, but the World Health Organization reports that 70 percent of mercury released in the past 100 years has been manmade, primarily from the burning of wastes containing inorganic mercury and from the burning of fossil fuels, particularly coal.

Who Eats Dolphin Meat?

Small towns that still practice dolphin hunting do so in large part for the meat, which is often consumed raw. The Japanese coastal town of Taiji, the Faroe Islands and the Solomon Islands are three areas where dolphin hunting is still legal and regularly practiced. In Taiji, the locals are regularly tested for mercury poisoning — with varied results. Outside of Taiji, the average parts per million of mercury (ppm) found in Japan's male population is 2.55, and 1.43 for Japanese females. Tetsuya Endo, a professor at the Health Sciences University of Hokkaido, tested hair samples of Taiji residents between December 2007 and July 2008. He found that Taiji males had an average ppm of 21.6 while Taiji females had 11.9. The recommended amount from the FDA is 1 ppm.

Is Mercury Really That Bad?

The people of Japan take mercury poisoning very seriously due to an incident which affected thousands of lives. In the town of Minamata, a chemical

factory released methylmercury in their wastewater for more than 35 years. The chemical accumulated in the fish and shellfish of Minamata Bay and the nearby Shiranui Sea, where the local populace harvested much of their food. In time, methylmercury infiltrated their nervous systems. The residents had increased difficulty walking and speaking. In extreme cases, insanity, paralysis, comas and death followed. This neurological illness is now called “Minamata disease.”

Taiji: Safe and Healthy?

The National Institute of Minamata Disease (NIMD) recently tested mercury levels in Taiji using hair samples and found similar numbers to Endo's. However, the NIMD declared the residents healthy and safe on May 9, 2010 at a press conference in Taiji.

NIMD has received criticism for this statement from other doctors studying mercury poisoning, including Pál Weihe, chief physician in the Department of Occupational Medicine, Public Health in the Faroe Islands.

Mercury and Memory

Pál Weihe has been testing the effects of consuming pilot whale meat on children in the Faroe Islands since the 1980's. Like Taiji, the Faroe Islands also practice dolphin hunting. The practice of killing pilot whales is a traditional event that transitions boys to manhood. Weihe began by studying pregnant mothers on the Faroe Islands, then following their children into their teenage years. Around 15 percent of the mothers tested had mercury levels higher than the recommended limit. “ The results show that there is a

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connection between the amount of mercury found in the fetus and the child's memory, attention, language, and other mental functions at the age of 7," Weihe said in a document regarding his testing. When the children were tested again at the age of 14, there were no improvements in the mental functions. While children can be affected from birth by mercury, healthy adults can rid their bodies of mercury.

The United States FDA states it can take up to a year for methylmercury levels to drop significantly. Mercury Poisoning From Dolphin Meat Remains a Major Concern for 'Cove' Activists Pregnant women and young or unborn children are particularly at risk. During dolphin drive hunting season, hundreds of dolphins in the southern coastal town of Taiji, Japan, face capture and slaughter at the hands of local fishermen. While some are ensnared to become marine park show toys, many others are killed for their meat, soon to be packaged and sold on supermarket shelves in Japan. Hunting the cetaceans is a tradition, strongly defended and protected in Japan. Yet international activists and marine mammal groups have fought to end dolphin hunting, in part because of the risk of toxins to humans.

Japan is one of the world's biggest consumers of dolphin meat, and it is considered a local delicacy in the small town of Taiji, reported The New York Times. In recent years, studies testing the mercury in dolphins have detected excessively high levels of the metal, which can result in neurological damage. "It's very much a danger, we think, to the people of Japan and consumers who eat dolphin and whale meat," said Mark Palmer, associate director of the Earth Island Institute's International Marine Mammal Project,

in an interview with TakePart. A study in 2010, conducted by the National Institute for Minamata Disease, found that Taiji residents had far higher average levels of methyl mercury in their hair than people in other areas of Japan—though follow-up tests indicated no ill effects.

Activists from the Dolphin Project believe there were problems in the study though, and take issue with the findings. Of the 3, 500 residents in the town, 1, 137 residents participated in the study, according to the Associated Press. “Mercury is not the only thing of course—there are heavy levels of PCBs [polychlorinated biphenyls] and pesticides—basically a lot of toxic pollutants that build up in the dolphin during their time in the surrounding oceans, like around Japan,” Palmer said. Dolphins, which live longer than other sea life and are at the top of the marine food chain, absorb more mercury than other commonly eaten fish, such as tuna or tilapia.

Exposure to these higher levels of mercury may be dangerous for people, Palmer explained. Mercury poisoning is particularly a concern for pregnant women and young or unborn children. Exposure in the womb or as a young child can lead to impaired brain and nervous system development, according to the Environmental Protection Agency’s website. In recent years — and particularly after the 2009 Oscar-winning documentary *The Cove* brought to light Japan’s dolphin hunting culture and the fight to save these mammals — dolphin meat consumption in the area has decreased. A few stores no longer carry the delicacy, and some local schools stopped serving whale meat to students, according to *The New York Times*.

Dolphin Meat Toxic With Mercury

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Appeals to stop the dolphin slaughter on humanitarian, moral, and animal cruelty grounds have not worked. Our best appeal is now based on food safety and the health of Japanese children and adults who are eating mercury poisoned dolphin meat. A hopeful sign is that one super market chain has banned selling dolphin meat, and two Taiji councilmen have broken the “ code of silence” and spoken up against children eating toxic dolphin meat. Cetaceans are at the top of the food chain and long-lived, therefore they bio-accumulate marine pollutants in their internal organs and muscle (red meat), especially heavy metals like mercury. Many tests since 2001 have shown dolphin and whale meat to be extremely toxic with high levels of mercury, way above the government standard safe level of . 4 parts per million (ppm). Mercury and methylmercury are strong neurotoxins, which can cause severe neurological diseases, especially to the fetuses of pregnant women and brain damage to children. Methylmercury is organic mercury which is especially toxic and crosses the placenta and blood brain barrier.

Minamata Disease

Since the 1950s, mercury poisoning from the Chisso Corp. plastics plant dumping into Minamata Bay on Kyushu, has caused over 2, 000 deaths, and as many as 30, 000 victims from “ Minamata Disease.” (AP 9/30/07)

Minamata Disease is a severe neurological syndrome with symptoms of ataxia, paralysis, impaired vision, hearing and speech, and in extreme cases insanity, coma, and death. Toxic mercury in some of the dolphins in Taiji are now higher than in the fish that caused Minamata disease, most of which had 9-24 ppm methylmercury (Understanding Environmental Pollution by

Marquita Hill, 1997. p. 217). Despite this history of mercury poisoning, local schools in the Taiji area have been feeding toxic dolphin meat to children in their school lunches. The Japanese Minister of Health and Welfare confirmed the high mercury levels in a 2003 survey, but has done nothing to safe-guard the public. The Fisheries Agency has issued an advisory urging pregnant women not to eat dolphin meat more than once every two months This meat was sold as whale meat at a market in Katsuura. (It was very popular).

-Helene O'Barry phot

Taiji Councilmen Speak Out Against Toxic Dolphin Meat

Fortunately, two Taiji councilmen, Mr. Junichirou Yamashita and Mr. Hisato Ryono, discovered that 150kg of short finned pilot whale meat had been served in local kindergartens, primary and junior high schools in October of 2006. They had samples of pilot whale meat tested by the minister of Health, Labor and Welfare, which showed mercury 10 to 16 times higher, and methylmercury 10-12 times higher than the maximum safe levels.

Consequently, they have come out publicly against feeding dolphin meat to school children. In early December 2006, the Japan Times tested a package of striped dolphin meat from the Shingu Central Okuwa Supermarket, and found and reported mercury at 5.40 ppm - 13.5 times higher than the 0.4 ppm safe level. On December 26, 2006, the Okuwa Supermarket Corporation banned the sale of all dolphin meat in all their stores.

Tetsuya Endo is a famous researcher at the Health Sciences University of Hokkaido, who studied the brains of deceased Minamata mercury poisoning

victims that showed even low levels of methylmercury can damage or destroy neurons. In a study done in 2005, Endo found the average level of methylmercury for false killer whales was 11.5 ppm, and the highest found was for striped dolphins at 26.2 ppm, 87 times higher than the safe level. In an interview with The Japan Times, Endo stated, "Everyone should avoid eating dolphin meat. If people continue to eat dolphin, there's a high probability of them having damage to their brains ... No government agency is studying the problem - no scientists in Japan want to study the subject; it's very political." <http://www.dolphinspirit.org/mercury.html>

A Short History of Dolphins PDFPrintE-mail

History of Dolphins

Written by Administrator

Dolphins are magical creatures who have been on Earth for some 25 million years, according to fossil evidence. The first recorded studies of dolphins and dolphin behavior was undertaken by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) in *Historia Animalium*, (The History of Animals). Aristotle was the first to correctly claim that dolphins were mammals. He observed that they bore their young alive and suckled them, breathed air and communicated by underwater sounds. Through the ages, people and dolphins have had a special bond. There are many well-documented stories throughout history of ancient mariners who were guided to safety by dolphins. Dolphin insignias were commonly used on ancient ships for protection. Ancient artifacts show dolphins being used in decorative ways.

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Prehistoric engraved images of dolphins have been found in South Africa. One shows a man swimming with dolphins.

At the palace of Knossos, an Aegean civilization, the bathroom of the queen was decorated with a frieze of dolphins. This palace is dated at 1600 BC. Dolphins have been found on funeral frescoes dated from the sixth century BC. Greeks decorated their ceramics with dolphin images in the fifth century BC. Forty Greek cities had images of dolphins on their coins. The Roman historian, Pliny the Elder, tells the story of a boy who rode on the back of a dolphin called Simo. Roman coins dated at 74 BC depict this dolphin scene. There is a similar story from Greece about a dolphin named Lassos, who fell in love with a boy and took him far out to sea for dolphin rides. As recently as October 2000, it was reported that a small boy drowning off the coast of Italy was rescued and brought ashore by a dolphin.

In mythology, it is said that Apollo first appeared at Delphi, the site of the oracle, in the form of a dolphin. In Greek, Delphi means dolphin. Taras, son of Neptune, founded a city called Tarento on the pot he was carried to safety by a dolphin. It is also said that Telemachus, son of Ulysses, fell into the water as a child. He was rescued by dolphins. Thereafter, Ulysses wore a ring engraved with the image of dolphins. The dolphin was sacred to the Greeks, and they would never dream of harming a dolphin.

Plutarch, around 75 AD, told the story of Korianos, a native of Asia Minor. Korianos pleaded for the life of a dolphin who was caught in a fishing net. The dolphin was saved. Later, Korianos was shipwrecked and his life was saved by a dolphin. Throughout history, there are stories told of the

relationship between dolphin and man, particularly of dolphin helping man catch fish. Oppian, a Greek poet of the second century AD, told stores of dolphins pushing fish into the nets of fishermen. http://encyclopedia.delphintherapieweb.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=5&Itemid=11 “ The mercury levels we found in the dead dolphins were high enough to be causing quite severe neurological effects” - Ross Thompson

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