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Home > News > Science > Article

SCIENCE

Dolphins' Solomons-To-Mexico Move Angers Activists

Tue July 22, 2003 01:35 PM ET  
By Elizabeth Fullerton

CANCUN, Mexico (Reuters) - A shipment from the South Pacific of more than 20 dolphins into the Caribbean resort of Cancun on Tuesday angered animal rights activists who say their transport and deposit straight into the sea was inhumane.

The animals, destined to entertain tourists at an aquatic theme park, were among 200 wild South Pacific bottlenose dolphins captured for sale in the anarchic Solomon Islands and held there in shallow pens.

In the early hours of Tuesday, the dolphins were flown on a Brasil Air Cargo DC-10 jet into Mexico, almost 8,000 miles away from home. They were inspected by government officials and unloaded into pens in the sea over several hours.

"This is the ultimate idea of tourism gone amok," said Ben White of the Washington-based Animal Welfare Institute. "These dolphins are out of the ocean for the first time and they're scared out of their minds. When they get here they have to do dorsal pulls for tourists having flipper fantasies who think it's spiritual," he added.

Activists also fear the animals could infect local dolphins and other sea life off the tropical Yucatan peninsula with new diseases.

The Mexican government's environmental protection agency has said the decision to allow the dolphins to be brought into Mexico was taken after consulting scientists and that the dolphins would be given full medical checks to ensure they could not pass on any disease.

"This is shameful," said Sara Rincon, president of the Cancun Society for Animal Protection. "The animals should be placed in quarantine for 40 days, not in the sea."

According to the Australian Associated Press, the Parque Nizuc bought the dolphins for \$260 each from local fishermen in the Solomon Islands, where ethnic fighting and lawlessness have claimed hundreds of lives over the past five years.

Australia had asked Mexico to block the deal, but Georgita Ruiz, who granted the government permit, said the park had met the conditions necessary to import the dolphins.

Workers at the park hauled the three-foot (one-meter) deep tanks carrying the dolphins from removal trucks onto rickety metal carts.

Under floodlights, up to 10 people wheeled each cart, clanking and see-sawing, down a wooden jetty to be tilted into pens in the sea, separated from the park's 15 Caribbean dolphins by mesh dividers.

"Many of these people are trainers and they are checking to see the dolphins are OK," said a worker at the park although she was not able to say exactly how many dolphins had arrived.

Around 20 journalists at the scene were prevented from seeing the dolphins close up, but the occasional squeal could be heard as the animals were moved.

SWIMMING WITH DOLPHINS

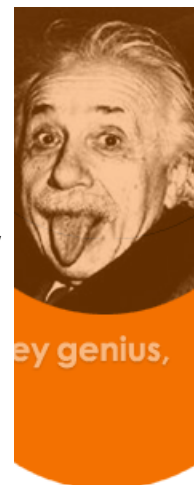
Officials have said as many as 28 dolphins were on board the plane. The park had originally ordered 33 but fewer were sent because of the unstable situation in the islands, Ruiz said.

Visitors to the park can swim with dolphins at a cost of \$86 per person on top of a \$28 admission fee, or simply kiss and pet the dolphins for \$47.

Mexican environmental groups have filed a lawsuit arguing it is illegal to bring exotic species into a protected natural area.

The trade in live dolphins is governed by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, which prohibits it if it is detrimental to them and not subject to proper regulation.

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