

Testimony at NOAA Public Hearing on Beluga Imports

By Dr. Lori Marino

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My name is Dr. Lori Marino and I am a neuroscientist at Emory University and Executive Director of the Kimmela Center, a science-based animal advocacy organization. I have been a science educator at a major research university and studied dolphin and whale brains, intelligence and cognition for over 20 years. Also, I've conducted several in-depth analyses of swim-with-dolphin programs and the captivity industry in general. I have published over 90 peer-reviewed scientific papers, book chapters and popular articles on these topics.

Today I'd like to cut through the smoke and mirrors and talk about the presumed educational value of these beluga whale imports and displays. The Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) requires that public display facilities provide a program of education that meets professionally recognized standards. Indeed, the Georgia Aquarium is quick to claim that this beluga whale import will serve an educational purpose.

To meet even minimum standards for education, two simple criteria must be met. First, the information provided must be *accurate and complete*. Second, there must be evidence, *based on valid outcome measures*, that people are truly being educated when they visit these facilities.

I'd like to address the question of whether either of these criteria is being met. I will give examples of online materials from SeaWorld and the Georgia Aquarium, but I have also studied online material from the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums (which endorses this importation) and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the trade organization that accredits the Georgia Aquarium and their co-applicants, SeaWorld, Shedd Aquarium and Mystic Aquarium.

First, looking at whether the information provided about the animals on display is *accurate*, theme parks publish material that is often false or misleading about dolphin and whale intelligence. They want to have it both ways. On the one hand, they want you to think that dolphins are intelligent enough to be worth paying money to see. But, on the other hand, they downplay that same intelligence so as to allay any ethical concerns about keeping them in captivity.

Here is one example of several examples: On their website, SeaWorld claims that the evidence for complex intelligence in dolphins is untested. This statement is patently false and ignores decades of scientific peer-reviewed research showing that many dolphins and whales possess the ability to comprehend a human-based language, are self-aware, and have highly developed cultures.

Information on theme park websites is also typically incomplete and geared toward biasing the public in favor of captivity. This is true of the Georgia Aquarium's so-called educational programs. Here are examples:

- 1) If one searches for information about bottlenose dolphins on the Georgia Aquarium website one finds a list of reasons why dolphins should be in captivity and nothing at all about their natural lives or intelligence.
- 2) So-called educational materials on belugas include courses entitled Animal Behavior with the following description:

What is enrichment? Why do we train animals? Before animals can live in a zoological setting, biologists must understand what they need and how they behave. While participating in this exploratory experience, students discover how the Aquarium staff maintains the health of the animals as well as the training techniques used in the process.

This is not an animal behavior course. This is an animal husbandry and training course.

- 3) The Georgia Aquarium claims their animal interaction program Beluga & Friends is an educational program when it is clearly just a "pet-the-beluga" entertainment exhibit no different from any recreational swim-with-the-dolphin program offered by other theme parks.
- 4) Even the Georgia Aquarium's vice president for education and training, Brian Davis, recently admitted to the New York Times that the aquarium is reluctant to provide specific information about the animals that is not consistent with the conservative beliefs of the majority of their visitors. Telling people what they want to hear is hardly a formula for education. In fact, it is the very opposite.

These are just some examples of deceptive messaging, misinformation, and entertainment disguised as education by the very facilities that claim they are importing these whales for educational purposes. There are many more. But clearly the basic requirement that information be accurate and complete is not being met.

Now let us turn to the question of whether the education claims of the Georgia Aquarium, SeaWorld and the marine theme park industry are based on valid outcome measures.

The theme park industry claims that the way to assess learning is by asking visitors what they believe or how they feel. They rely upon dubious studies that have been shown to be deeply flawed and polls that ask visitors whether they *believe* they have learned something. That would be like me not giving any tests or assignments to my students and then just asking them at the end of the semester if they learned anything or enjoyed it, and if they all said "yes" – well, I'd give all of them A's. If I did that, I would be fired! The basic fact is that the only way to assess learning is by measuring long term retention of knowledge.

In their application to NOAA the Georgia Aquarium claims their educational goals meet state standards but offer no data to support this and cite no peer-reviewed outcome studies.

In summary, despite the claims of the Georgia Aquarium that this beluga import will serve an educational purpose they have provided no legitimate evidence that any real education is taking place during visits to marine mammal public displays. They, and their co-applicants, are not meeting the minimal standards set by the MMPA for education.

It is for this and other substantive reasons that I steadfastly oppose the Georgia Aquarium's application.

Thank you.