

'The Future of Zoos'. *North & South*. **White, Mike**. © September 2006. (pp.52-62)

Calls to import more dolphins for Napier's Marineland have split the community and refocused attention on how we treat our animals. MIKE WHITE visits our last, loneliest captive dolphin and looks at

The Future Of

ZOOS

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There's a sad, drab face to Napier's Marineland these days, like a family photo album where the pictures have faded along with the happy memories. The woman in the shop sits knitting, pictures in the foyer of past milestones have curled edges, there's a dusty toy train collection in a side room and the souvenir selections are stuck in the '70s.

Outside by the main pool are three attendants, two scrap-hunting gulls and a lone dolphin. It's school holidays but fewer than 50 people pepper the stained concrete stand, offering a smattering of applause as Kelly the dolphin does her tricks, spinning skywards, balancing a ball, waving her tail.

Then California sea lion Makea lollops through his routine — mimicking a muscleman, doing a handstand on his front flippers, pretending to pray — a few fish dropped down his eager gullet each time he obeys the trainer's commands. The attendant's commentary for the Animal Antics show sounds flat and rote, running through some basic biological facts and trying to warm up the mid-winter audience with well-worn lines.

It's vaudeville with white gumboots.

Half an hour and half a bucket of fish later the show's over, the kids wander off to see the other animals, get their photos taken with a penguin, watch the fur seals get fed and twist their parents' arms for ice cream.

Meanwhile back in the main pool Kelly swims wall-hugging laps, like a cyclist dizzily circling a velodrome. Barely 50 metres away, past a three-metre fence and three strands of barbed wire, is Hawke Bay, a giant coastal sweep ending at Cape Kidnappers, which points into the Pacific like a skeletal finger.

This is where, on December 13 1974, Kelly was plucked as a two-year-old. By that stage Marineland had been going for nearly a decade and had caught dozens of dolphins, most of which died

within a few months or years of capture. In time, calls surfaced for Marineland to stop keeping dolphins, but permits continued to be granted. From 1999 onwards Marineland survived with just two dolphins, Kelly and another caught the same day, Shona.

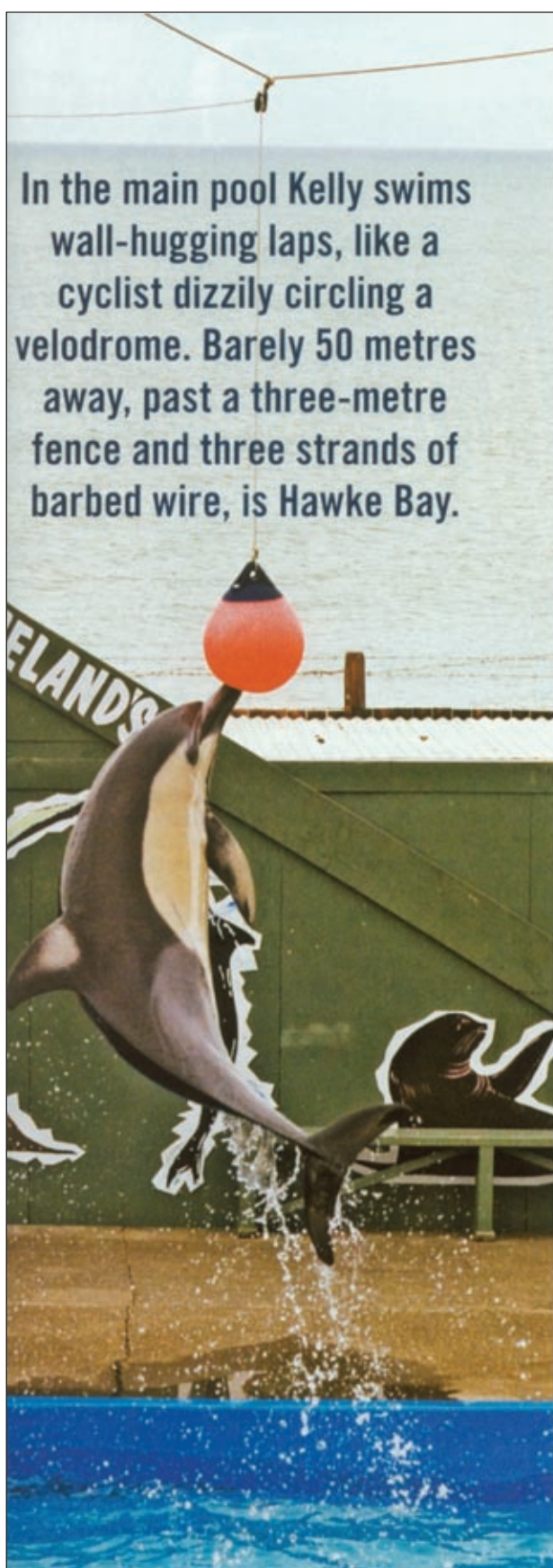
When Shona died in April this year many presumed that after 40 years and 60-plus dolphins it was the penultimate act in the drama that had been Marineland.

Times had changed, people said. Once the remaining elderly dolphin eventually died there'd be no more shows, perhaps no more Marineland. But by May a public meeting had been called in Napier, with 350 people packing a hall to clamour for replacement dolphins. A petition was hastily circulated and in five weeks more than 13,500 people signed (the equivalent of 20 per cent of Napier's population). It's unclear exactly how many petitioners were local residents but they all called for the government to permit and financially support more dolphins being brought in.

Animal welfare groups were aghast, astounded at what kind of cultural backwater could get 1300 let alone 13,000 signatures to keep dolphins in a concrete tank in the 21st century. Suddenly dolphins were back on the agenda and as pro and anti factions slugged it out in the local papers the rest of the country was left to ponder just how much our attitudes have changed despite considering ourselves a nation of animal lovers.

On a sleety Friday evening in July about 40 people gathered in Marineland's foyer over bowls of crisps and a few wines to pat themselves on the back. They were the loyal band who'd manned petition tables outside wind-buffed supermarket doors and spoken at public meetings encouraging locals to support the call for more dolphins.

Seventy-year-old Anne Foreman summed up the group's genesis. "Shona's dead and that leaves Kelly and you can't leave one poor



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dolphin lonely forever. So we thought, we've got to do something."

Fellow supporter Rachel Pettigrew, a 36-year-old insurance broker, says it's as much a fiscal issue as an animal welfare one. "Dolphins at Marineland are a nationwide brand, have been for 40 years, and there's no way you can ever replicate that. If the dolphins go I can't see any economic way to keep Marineland going. They just won't get the people."

Pettigrew agrees the current facility — a 30m x 15m x 4.5m sterile concrete pool barely bigger than a decent backyard swimming pool — is inadequate nowadays but is adamant Kelly isn't stressed. "I think she's looked after better than some old people in New Zealand."

And she can't see why people are making a song and dance about keeping dolphins captive when there are so many other species in zoos around the country. "They treat dolphins as a mythological creature that will be immortal forever. People have put them up on such a high pedestal their emotions are clouded as to what's really best for the species."

Before long someone taps a knife on a glass, calls the assembled group to order and the speeches start, led off by the soirée organiser, the man behind the petition.

Harry Lawson has been on the Napier City Council for 18 years, tried unsuccessfully to get more dolphins for Marineland in 1995 and 2000 and says the dolphins and art deco — and to an extent Cape Kidnappers' gannet colony — are the only tourist attractions specific to Hawke's Bay. So when he sensed the council wasn't going to move to replace Shona, he figured he'd test public opinion by holding a meeting.

"I thought if we got 20 people we'd pack up our tent and forget about it. But I was staggered; we had to turn people away. Only five people spoke against it — the rest supported replacing the dolphins. Now, what do you do when your public says that? So I started this petition."

Five weeks later when he travelled to Parliament to present it, he had 13,588 names.

Because the Napier council owns Marineland it must apply to the Conservation minister to import more dolphins. (Lawson is clear they want to bring in dolphins born in captivity, not wild ones.) But he's been amazed at the lack of support from his council colleagues.

"Is the council going to take the moral high ground and say we're not having dolphins because it's not PC? All I've done is ask people what they want and they've told me and I'm reflecting that. I thought that's what we were elected to do but obviously I'm bloody naïve. All I want is to keep the proud tradition of Marineland going," he says, forehead fracturing into furrows as though he's damned if he knows why it's so controversial.

Lawson's Scottish family shipped out to New Zealand more than 50 years ago, his dad working on the railways and wharves. He still has a hint of his homeland's lilt, was a carpenter but now manages rental properties, and at 64 says this will be his last term on the council. "I don't see myself as a politician — I like to think I'm a battler for the underdog."

In recent years Napier has lost its hospital and newspaper and he's dead keen Marineland won't follow — especially not for loathsomely PC reasons. And to stop that it simply has to have dolphins. "Can the Rolling Stones survive without Mick Jagger? Can you play tennis with one leg?"

You could caricature Lawson as curmudgeonly old school but he represents a significant constituency and if, like him, you don't believe the dolphins are suffering — instead of talking about



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dolphins in a tank he calls it putting them "in a home to join the family" — then his argument is logical.

"I think the only cruelty we do to dolphins is we love them too much. Where are the people complaining about equestrians who jump over all those things — is that cruel to horses? Or when people go out and catch marlin and play them for six hours? Napier's a small town and Marineland's a soft target."

For his troubles he's had emails labelling him a Nazi and a village idiot and suggesting he'll "suffer the consequences".

"My question to these people is what have they ever done in their lives, other than bloody protest? Napier's not a great place by bloody accident; it's a great place because people stood up and had a bloody vision."

At the entrance to Napier mayor Barbara Arnott's office is a row of portraits of her predecessors. Track back five frames and you find the late Sir Peter Tait, a driving civic force who waltzed the Queen into Marineland in March 1970 in what they call their greatest moment. Tait was never one to pull punches and you can almost imagine his eyes swivelling down the line of local leaders to fix Arnott with a paternal glare.

Arnott didn't sign Harry Lawson's petition and though she has to keep to council protocol and respond to community views it's crystal clear she'd rather see dolphins out in the Bay while she's sailing rather than watch them cooped up in a concrete tank.

"New Zealand has moved on. We see ourselves as clean and green, we robustly defend the right of whales not to be killed, so why would we want to capture dolphins?"

In 2000 the Department of Conservation suggested a \$10 million upgrade would be needed before Marineland could import more dolphins but even with this the Conservation minister at the time, Sandra Lee, suggested it was unlikely she'd approve an application.

So the council decided not to submit one and, despite Lawson's petition, Arnott insists this six-year-old decision still stands.

What the council has done is investigate ways Marineland could survive without dolphins and is currently costing the ideas, with a decision on the facility's future likely by year's end. But a lack of enthusiasm is already evident — in the city's just-signed-off 10-year plan a Marineland redevelopment doesn't even feature.

Arnott says the council may still apply for more dolphins but the projected \$10 million upgrade has grown to \$15 million and much of that would have to come from ratepayers, at the rate of \$200 to \$300 for every resident.

She says Marineland loses \$180,000 annually (Lawson insists it's only \$130,000) and compares the 70,000 visitors it gets every year with twice that many paying to see the National Aquarium (also owned by the council) just along the road.

Ultimately, it seems, the dolphin decision will be made as much on financial as philosophical grounds.

Arnott realises dolphins are as iconic to Napier as Pania's sculpture but argues the region has so many other attractions now — from the gannets to the sublime red wines produced by members of the region's Gimblett Gravels Winegrowers Association — that Marineland isn't fundamental to its tourism trade any more.

Walk into the complex off Marine Parade, where sentinel Norfolk pines split the city from the seafont, and manager Gary Macdonald will tell you different. He's worked 33 years at Marineland, helped to catch and train Kelly and Shona and been manager since 1977. And he's watched bitterly as Marineland, which has entertained five million visitors since opening in January 1965, has been starved of investment so it now resembles a



Petition organiser Harry Lawson: "Napier's not a great place by bloody accident; it's a great place because people stood up and had a bloody vision."

rundown relic. "Just look at what we've got — a concrete tank in the ground. That's not a modern zoo — it hasn't been a modern zoo for years and years."

If dolphins disappear from Marineland Macdonald estimates ticket sales will plummet 75 per cent. While visitor numbers are currently steady, the facility has lost money for a decade and the current crisis leaves Macdonald and his nine fulltime staff in unenviable limbo.

He's adamant that with a revamp and four dolphins it could make a profit. And, well used to defending his patch, he smartly labels critics who claim his trade is cruel as blinkered environmental evangelists blinded by their beliefs.

But even his attitudes have altered since Kelly and Shona were brought from a world governed by the rhythms of the waves and tides to one governed by show time and a trainer's whistle. "I don't have any regrets about that because I don't believe in retrospective morality. But would I do it now? No. Because I don't believe it's right in this day and age to capture wild animals for display."

He draws a clear distinction between this and dolphins bred in captivity because "if they've never experienced the wild then they won't know it".

But has Kelly had a better life in captivity than she would have had in the wild?

Macdonald pauses for quite a time. "In the very best world it would be nice if we didn't have any animals in captivity. We wouldn't have cats and dogs and budgies and farm animals and horse riding. Would Shona and Kelly have had a better time out in the wild? I don't know. But they would have been dead an awful long time ago. Quality of life? We believe our animals have a good quality of life."

And that's where Macdonald, with a business to sustain and a job in jeopardy, parts company with mainstream marine biologists who've also spent most of their working lives studying dolphins.

Steve Dawson, an Otago University senior lecturer in marine sciences, has tracked dolphins around New Zealand's coastline for 20 years, clocking up thousands of kilometres in inflatable boats, and says captivity for entertainment is simply immoral.

"There's no justification at all from an educational point of view. Dophinariums teach us they swim and jump — but we already know that. And they don't go into conservation issues because if you tell people how incredibly complicated these animals are, how their sonar can see inside things in a way we just don't understand and how they range over hundreds of kilometres and dive deeply, folks are going to look at the tank and say, 'Well, that's not like that, is it?'"

Dawson is scathing of those who justify Marineland's captive dolphins on the grounds there are many such facilities overseas. "You might as well say because there's no legislation protecting sweatshop workers in the Philippines we won't have any here either. Arguments like that are just dumb."

While new dolphinariums are opening, mainly in Asia, many around the world are closing. In the 1970s the UK had 36 dolphin attractions — now there are none.

And Dawson gives short shrift to the claim it's okay to have dolphins that are captive-bred. "That's like saying if you get a mistreated dog from the pound it's okay to mistreat it for the rest of its life — I just don't buy that."

Dawson says because so many dolphins die in captivity the breeding programmes can't keep up, so dolphinariums frequently catch wild animals. So any that Marineland takes means fewer for other dolphinariums — meaning more dolphins will eventually be caught. "Marineland's just a ghost of the past. It made sense to our value systems 40 years ago but it doesn't make sense now."

Marine scientist Mark Orams heads Massey University's Coastal Marine Research Group that has studied common dolphins, like the ones at Marineland, for a decade. Knowing how incredibly sensitive to change the species is, Orams says what Gary Macdonald

and his staff have achieved is remarkable and he pays tribute to the care the dolphins receive in a dated facility. But no matter how good the care or how strong the bond between Macdonald and the dolphins, Kelly should be the last dolphin in Napier, Orams insists.

"I completely understand Gary's perspective. This has been his life, he's passionate and knows he could do it well, so he sees nothing wrong with it. But he's too close to take an objective view as to whether this is ethically the right thing to do for those animals."

Marineland uses the longevity of Kelly and Shona as strong planks in its case for captivity (while rarely mentioning the attraction's other 60 dolphins which died prematurely). It argues common dolphins live 15 to 18 years in the wild and the survival of Kelly and Shona to 36 shows the advantages of captivity.

Not so, says Orams. While the oldest dolphin they've carried out an autopsy on was in its 20s he utterly rejects they live longer in captivity, saying nobody really knows what the common dolphin's lifespan is as so little research has been done. Whatever the numbers, he points to the obvious — they're animals that have evolved to live in the open ocean and their whole biology and social behaviour are oriented around travelling huge distances, not being confined in a barren pool.

Orams was previously a professional sailor, won a round-the-world title with Sir Peter Blake on *Steinlager 2* in 1990, was part of Team New Zealand's 2000 defence of the America's Cup and is now executive director of the Sir Peter Blake Trust, which continues Blake's leadership, environmental and youth work.

"We're a maritime nation with a proud maritime history. We're held up as a leader in conservation and it's completely hypocritical for us to now be proposing to put animals in captivity for our entertainment. There's absolutely nothing like going out on the water to experience dolphins and all the other wonderful creatures that surround us."

Critics argue it's too expensive to see dolphins in the wild and, anyway, Hawke's Bay doesn't have a dolphin-watching operation.

But DOC figures show we don't have to travel far to find someone offering genuine dolphin experiences. There are 33 operations permitted around the country dedicated to marine mammals and



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another 75 part-time ones. Orams says operators often offer large school discounts so kids can learn about the marine environment.

Otago University zoology senior lecturer and dolphin specialist Liz Slooten questions whether we have a *right* to see dolphins anyway. "If you desperately wanted to see a Russian person, you'd get on a plane and fly to Russia. You wouldn't expect someone to organise for there to be a captive Russian in some little room where you could pay \$20 to talk to them for half an hour. It's a bizarre concept. We'd never do that for humans and yet we think it's okay to do it with animals."

In fact we've done it with animals for 100 years. In June 1906 the Bostock and Wombwell Circus gifted a lion to Wellington and it was named King Dick, in memory of Prime Minister Richard Seddon who had died that month. King Dick formed the basis of the country's first zoo, with the capital's burghers raising £100 in 1909 to buy him a mate.

With centenary celebrations scheduled for October, Wellington Zoo is hurriedly finishing a night enclosure for its 12 chimpanzees to replace the sad, foul-smelling room they currently shelter in.

While things have moved on from the days of tacky chimps' tea parties and camel rides, the zoo's general manager of operations, Mauritz Basson, admits half the zoo needs a serious upgrade which a 10-year, \$15 million plan will hopefully provide.

Curled into 13 sloping hectares in Newtown, the zoo recently hit headlines for hiring out its two cheetahs for off-site functions at \$2500 a shot. So far it's done four such "encounters", for groups including the National Bank and a Wainuiomata pet shop. Similarly there's a \$250-a-couple encounter on offer which allows people to spend half an hour, within the zoo, stroking a cheetah. The zoo argues it's a fantastic opportunity to push conservation messages about the big cats' plight. Critics say it's conservation for the rich.

Basson, a brash, bearded former South African who came here five years ago from Johannesburg Zoo, makes no apologies for making money from zoo resources if it subsidises things such as cheap visits for children.

But beyond this kind of feel-good spin, it's clear that zoos are businesses — and cash-strapped ones. (Although it's a

charitable trust, Wellington Zoo is propped up by Wellington City Council, which pays \$2.3 million of the zoo's \$4.1 million operating cost.)

Basson worries bad publicity might scare off the rich corporations and individuals they're targeting with the cheetah encounters and argues the animal welfare lobby's outbursts are counter-productive. "If we don't have money to upgrade the zoo the animals will unfortunately have to be managed in substandard enclosures. Conservation needs to pay for itself — it's a slightly foreign concept to places like New Zealand."

Basson insists the best way to get the conservation message through is by people seeing, and now touching, some of the zoo's 500 animals. "You can't experience that in a documentary. It doesn't matter how good old [naturalist/broadcaster Sir David] Attenborough is, he can't give you the real experience.

"Why are we hiding kakapo on a godforsaken island in the middle of the southern ocean when nobody can ever see it. The kakapo can go extinct tomorrow and I wouldn't bat an eyelid because I've never seen, smelt or heard one."

In a world "Homo sapiens have stuffed up" by wrecking natural environments, Basson reckons zoos have a vital role. "You can talk to any zoo person and all of us agree zoos are unfortunately a necessary evil. There's nothing more spectacular than seeing a cheetah going full throttle in Kruger National Park [in South Africa], so why the hell would I want to put him in an enclosure?"

"But I know if I don't put him in an enclosure and use that animal to educate a couple of thousand people a year we're losing the plot — and we're losing the war [against animal extinction]. And as long as we get anti-zoo people making our life more difficult and I have to spend hours trying to convince some idiot that, yes, it is worthwhile spending \$2500 to get a cheetah encounter, we've lost another species. I agree: animals shouldn't be in captivity, period. But they are — it's something we can't change."

And given that most of them were bred in captivity, Basson argues life isn't that bad. "If you grew up in a 4m x 4m flat all your life and you've never been outside the flat you wouldn't know anything better. You wouldn't know there was grass."

Basson's bombast increases when asked about animal rights

Wellington Zoo operations manager, Mauritz Basson, came here five years ago from Johannesburg Zoo and makes no apologies for making money from zoo resources, including cheetah encounters.





Curled into 13 sloping hectares in Newtown, the Wellington Zoo recently hit headlines for hiring out its two cheetahs for off-site functions at \$2500 a shot. Below: Annemieke Timmermans and Charlie the cheetah.

groups such as SAFE, whose spokesman Hans Kriek has been a regular critic. "I have no respect for them whatsoever. He [Kriek] is not willing to respect my point of view. My ethics and animal welfare conduct are way higher than his ... He just doesn't understand the industry."

While New Zealand zoos are improving, Kriek, a zookeeper in Holland for seven years, says it doesn't alter the fact that animals designed to be in the wild have their lives totally controlled by humans, who dictate everything from when they eat to if they mate and who it will be with.

He's contemptuous about the new zoo buzzword of "conservation" and the respectability vaunted "captive-breeding programmes" have anointed zoos with.

Most zoo animals aren't critically endangered and only a small number are actually allowed to breed. Of those that do, hardly any are returned to the wild. Mostly, captive-breeding programmes simply sustain zoo populations throughout the world with animals being swapped and sold. At Auckland Zoo, for example, only some native birds and tuatara (and in the future maybe some frogs) have been returned to their natural environment. Don't kid yourself that any cute offspring behind the wire will ever see an African savannah or Asian jungle, says Kriek.

"We keep them in zoos so we can walk up to them and look at them. We do it for us — we don't do it for the animals. Despite the

disguise of conservation and breeding, zoos are still primarily there as a form of entertainment. We need to see animals as individual beings with needs and likes of their own which should be able to live their lives in a normal setting. And I certainly don't think zoos contribute much to that attitude."





Auckland Zoo director Glen Holland, another expat South African, is as calm as his Wellington counterpart Basson is booming. Holland just sighs and says it's sad animal welfare groups waste energy attacking zoos which could be used against blatant examples of animal exploitation.

Zoos aren't the places they used to be, he emphasises, where animals were caged just for people to gawk at them. "We are now scientific institutions."

He points to Auckland Zoo's research, disease control work, animal husbandry and education (it's just spent \$750,000 on classrooms for the 60,000 children who visit in school groups each year).

Highly skilled zoo staff often help DOC in its work and assist overseas conservation projects. And they contribute financially to conservation campaigns — for example, Auckland Zoo donates 20 per cent of the profit from each \$95 cheetah encounter (\$8) to cheetah preservation projects in Africa. A similar donation is made from its other daily encounter programmes with animals such as elephants (\$120 a person), tigers (\$120) and hippos (\$60). Auckland Zoo conservation fund donations to a variety of field projects total \$155,000 in the past five years.

Holland says visitor numbers are increasing — last year 550,000 people went through its Western Springs gates — much of the rise on the back of the popular TV2 series *The Zoo*, which focuses on the facility. And, he argues, only a tiny minority disapprove of what he and his staff do and none of them ever come and talk to him.

That's not entirely accurate though: Robyn McDonald, the Royal New Zealand SPCA's chief executive, says Auckland Zoo tried to woo it into supporting two more elephants being imported from Thailand — but the SPCA refused after visiting the zoo and discussing the issue.

"It's simply not okay to acquire an elephant just because it'll bring more visitors in. People who want elephants in zoos have to seriously question where they are coming from."

McDonald also questions things such as the cheetah encounters, saying they're not enhancing the animals' natural instincts but instead are keeping them as tame as possible.

The celebrated escapades of Jin, the zoo's escaped otter, clearly contrasted its life at large with its existence in captivity and raised

questions about why we needed to keep Asian otters in Auckland, McDonald says.

"Gandhi said you can judge a country by the way it treats its animals and we don't treat our animals terribly well. We treat them better than other countries because we can afford to. But we can afford to do an awful lot more."

In 1904, a 23-year-old pygmy called Ota Benga was bought for a few yards of cloth and some salt from a tribe in the Belgian Congo by explorer Samuel Verner. He was shipped to New York, had his teeth filed to points to make him look fearsome and was eventually put on display — in the Bronx Zoo's monkey cage. On a single day in September 1906, 400,000 people crammed in to stare at him. Eventually released, he committed suicide in 1916.

The idea of caging a human is so utterly repugnant now it's galling to think it could have happened within the past century. And maybe in time, caging animals will be seen with the same revulsion.

Change has occurred slowly — there's only one tatty circus touring New Zealand with animals nowadays, game fish are largely tagged instead of killed, and more and more people are rebelling against the cruelty of battery hen and pig farming.

It's likely that ending dolphin performances will be the next step in the evolution of our animal welfare attitudes.

American Ric O'Barry has been fighting for such change for more than 35 years. Originally employed at Miami Seaquarium and trainer of the dolphins that played Flipper in the 1960s TV series, he changed his views and began campaigning against dolphin captivity in 1970.

Speaking from France, where he's seeking to stop another dolphin attraction opening, he seems depressed that many people's attitudes have changed little from when the first dolphin show opened in Florida in 1938.

"The justification is it's educational — people are going to become aware of them and then going to save them. That's a fallacy. Look at Japan, where they slaughter 20,000 dolphins every year in the most brutal way imaginable. There are 50 dolphinariums in Japan — that means hundreds of millions of people who've been through those facilities, have supposedly been educated and are now going to help the dolphins. And yet I can't find one Japanese person out of these millions who's going to save these animals.

"We've been keeping tigers and elephants in captivity for thousands of years and it hasn't helped them a damn bit. So there's no science that substantiates the claim that keeping any wild animal and displaying it is going to save it."

O'Barry says Napier's contemplation of importing "battery dolphins" would be as retrograde as it was unethical. "People go to New Zealand because it's eco-friendly and this is a slap in the face of that."

However, he draws comfort from the belief that Conservation minister Chris Carter, whom he has met while speaking at the same conferences, will never grant a permit to import another dolphin. "He's got to be fair to both sides but he's very hip, this guy — he's the real deal. If Chris Carter has an open mind and simply absorbs all the information, the dolphins will win hands down."

Though there are 2000 captive dolphins around the world O'Barry says ending Marineland's shows would send a powerful international message.

And his message to those campaigning for more dolphins?

"These people are never going to see a snow leopard. Does that mean we have to go to the Himalayas and drag one of them into a building too? You don't learn to respect nature by capturing it." ■