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**Toward the end of dolphinariums in France**  
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## **Toward the end of dolphinariums in France**

On 6 May 2017, Ségolène Royal, France's Minister of the Environment, signed a decree aiming to ensure better conditions for cetaceans in dolphinariums<sup>1</sup>. Facing pressure from environmental NGOs, the minister decided to restrict dolphinariums' activities by tightening the rules regulating this sector; these rules had not been reformed since 1981. This decision will ensure greater well-being for dolphins and orcas in captivity.

### **I. Ségolène Royal's decree**

According to this decree, the size of the basins will have to be increased, up to 3500 m<sup>2</sup> for an orca, as well as their depth; parks have three years to comply with these directives. In addition, it will no longer be possible to use chlorine to treat ponds.

Furthermore, dolphinariums will be required to use the services of experts to care for their animals. Contact between dolphins and visitors will no longer be permitted; this means that water parks will not be able to offer visitors opportunities to swim with dolphins.

Finally, this decree ends the breeding of dolphins and orcas in captivity. This last point has been widely criticized by the dolphinarium industry because it means that, in the long term, water parks will have to alter their activities and will not be allowed to offer shows involving dolphins and killer whales. Nevertheless, NGOs regret that this decree does not put an immediate end to such shows, which can be stressful for animals.

### **II. A global trend?**

The actions taken by the Minister of the Environment respond to a global concern for the well-being of dolphins. Similar measures have already been adopted by other countries, notably by the United Kingdom in the early 1990s. Dolphinariums in the UK have had to close since they did not have the financial capacity to upgrade their structures to the newly defined standards.

This trend has accelerated since 2013 with the American documentary *Blackfish*, which detailed the problems that captivity creates for killer whales. In reaction to this film, the theme park company SeaWorld, the American leader in this industry, decided to expand the size of its basins, and in 2016, SeaWorld ceased the breeding of orcas in captivity. However, water parks have continued to be developed in Asia, particularly in China, where a killer whale breeding center was inaugurated in February 2017<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> "Biodiversité", 6 May 2017, accessed 15 May 2017 at [http://www.ecologique-solidaire.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/2017.05.06\\_CP\\_Dolphinariums.pdf](http://www.ecologique-solidaire.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/2017.05.06_CP_Dolphinariums.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Huang, Echo (2017), "As countries move to ban orca captivity, China opens its first killer-whale breeding center", *Quartz*, 27 February, accessed 15 May 2017 at <https://qz.com/919644/chinas-amusement-giant-chimelong-opened-the-nations-first-killer-whale-breeding-center/>.

Resistance to the tightening of legislation regarding dolphinariums is strong and comes mainly from the tourism sector (hotels, restaurants, etc.), whose profits depend directly or indirectly on the success of water parks.

### **III. The role of NGOs**

The decisions made by Ségolène Royal are mainly the result of activities carried out by pro-environmental associations that have, for several years, denounced the activities of water parks. Some have conducted awareness actions outside parks; others, such as the Brigitte Bardot Foundation and La Fondation 30 Millions d'Amis (the 30 Million Friends Foundation), have expressed their concerns to the authorities and have contributed to the ministry in the drafting of this decree. Such campaigns organized by NGOs have helped raise public awareness of the welfare issues regarding captive animals.

### **IV. The need to adapt**

Dolphinariums are not the only industry that has been the target of environmental and animal rights organizations. Instances of cruelty to animals in zoos and slaughterhouses have also been denounced. It is now a matter for all animal-related industries to take a better account of animal well-being and suffering and to adapt their products, processes, and services to these new constraints. It will be necessary for water parks to develop and offer new attractions that are more environmentally friendly, for example, by creating programming based on education. To achieve this transition, dolphinariums should not consider animal welfare associations as adversaries; rather, they would be wise to create associations with them for the development of their new projects. In this way, they can work together on the design of more environmentally acceptable attractions.

It is also the responsibility of the authorities to adapt their agendas to meet environmental demands and to take swift action to adopt or change animal welfare legislation in order to prevent the situation from further deteriorating. In the case of dolphinariums, the French government waited more than 35 years (the last decree dates back to 1981) to address the problems related to the well-being of captive dolphins and orcas. It is therefore necessary for all stakeholders—including government institutions, tourism-related industries, entertainment companies, and animal welfare rights organizations, in addition to the public—to promote dialogue, consider societal evolutions, and demand action.

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