

# Waves of Profit

How the tourism industry profits from the Taiji dolphin hunts





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# About the Authors

For more than 70 years, World Animal Protection has been moving people, companies and governments to act to improve the lives of animals. We campaign to transform the tourism industry from one that harms to one that ensures that every wild animal can thrive in an abundant natural habitat that is humanely protected, for the benefit of all.

Action for Dolphins has been working to impact the economic viability of hunting dolphins in Taiji, Japan, for 12 years. In 2015, Action for Dolphins brought a legal action against the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums which led to 62 Japanese aquariums cutting ties with the dolphin hunts.



# Preface

Every year, the coves of Taiji in Japan run red with blood as family groups of dolphins are brutally ripped apart. Hundreds of these sentient beings are slaughtered while many others are subjected to a lifetime of captivity in dolphin entertainment venues across the globe. It is inconceivable that such cruelty persists in full public view in the present era. What is even more astounding is that major travel companies continue to promote and sell tickets to venues that have relied on Taiji for their captive dolphins.

This report exposes those venues who have purchased their dolphins from Taiji and the travel companies who support them. The message to those travel companies is simple: sever all ties to venues linked to Taiji immediately and, ultimately, remove all captive dolphin venues from your offerings as part of a broader suite of wildlife-friendly policies.

Condemning these highly intelligent, long-lived animals to a lifetime of misery in small, mainly chlorinated pools is emblematic of the cruelty inherent in the captive wildlife tourism industry. We will campaign for their freedom until every tank is empty.

To those travel companies who are not in this report but continue to sell and promote captive dolphin venues, we caution you not to be complacent. Our report exposes the venues that have been directly linked to the Taiji dolphin hunts, but we know there are others. Be assured that we will keep digging, keep investigating and keep exposing any company or venue that profits from the horrors of Taiji.

# Executive Summary

The Taiji dolphin hunts in Japan have received worldwide criticism for many years now, and rightly so. Dolphins who are victims to these hunts are violently separated from their family pods to be slaughtered on site for their flesh or sent to a captive dolphin entertainment venue.

The latter often endure a traumatic journey to cruel venues around the world where they are forced to spend the remainder of their lives in a barren environment.

**Tourism is the main profit driver of these hunts and global travel companies selling tickets to these venues are profiting from this suffering.**

Whether captured from the wild or bred into captivity, the use of dolphins in wildlife tourist entertainment causes them harm, stress and discomfort.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, their reduction from wild complex predators to circus-style performers is demeaning.

World Animal Protection and Action for Dolphins conducted desktop and in-country research in 2023 and 2024 to examine the scale of the tourism industry's connection to the Taiji dolphin hunts. The research revealed that 107 dolphin entertainment venues across 17 countries have purchased dolphins originating from these cruel hunts, thereby contributing to the economic incentive of the Taiji dolphin hunts.





**Image:** Dolphins performing for tourists at Taiji Whale Museum.

We assessed 17 travel companies, including Trip.com, Klook, Traveloka, GetYourGuide and TUI to find out if they offered tickets to dolphin entertainment venues linked to the inhumane Taiji dolphin hunts.

Of the 17 assessed, six sold tickets to venues linked to the Taiji dolphin hunts, with one offering tickets for up to 19 Taiji linked venues.

Positively, of the 17 companies we assessed, 11 companies did not sell tickets to Taiji linked dolphin entertainment venues. However, while a few of these companies have developed policies that avoid all - or at least some - captive wildlife activities, some still continue to sell tickets to dolphin entertainment venues.

Both consumers and the travel industry have the power to stop the wild capture and exploitation of dolphins. While consumers can achieve this by choosing not to book tickets or holidays with travel companies that promote dolphin entertainment venues, travel companies must take responsibility for their role in promoting and sending visitors to dolphin entertainment venues.

The public is still largely unaware of the cruelty involved in dolphin entertainment, let alone the fact dolphins are still being taken from the wild. When travel companies sell or promote activities involving dolphins, this contributes to the harmful public assumption that these activities are acceptable.

# What are the Taiji Dolphin Hunts?

## The Hunts

Every year from September to March, dolphin hunters in Taiji, a small coastal town in Japan, gather to hunt down pods of dolphins or other small whales who pass through the waters as part of their age-old migrations.

The hunters lower steel poles into the ocean and bang on them with hammers to disorient unsuspecting pods of dolphins by creating a sound wall underwater. These frightening sounds are amplified with metal 'fans' attached at the ends of these poles.



**Image:** Instruments used to create sound walls underwater to disorientate wild dolphin pods, driving them towards the cove.

After this, the boats close in on the visibly agitated and stressed dolphins and lead them towards an area commonly known as 'The Cove'. The long chase and sound-based hunting can result in acute stress and injury.<sup>2</sup>

When the pod approaches the shore, hunters pull a net across the cove and trap them to begin the 'selection process' and bloodshed. Dolphins destined to be sold as meat are roughly wrestled into position and brutally slaughtered with their distressed family members nearby.<sup>3</sup>

Other dolphins are forcefully dragged away to holding pens, their first stop on a long, traumatic journey to a life of captivity. These intelligent animals may be subjected to further suffering during travel in boats, shallow pens on trucks, or between countries on long-haul flights.

In the wild, dolphins form close social bonds in pods of varying sizes, depending on species and location, ranging from a handful of individuals to more than 30. Separation from others in their pod is an extremely traumatic ordeal for these animals and causes major distress.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the prolonged chasing, herding, confinement and restraining can lead to severe stress, injury, and trauma for the animals, and even prove fatal for some.<sup>5</sup> Studies suggest that mortality rates increase six-fold after capture.<sup>6</sup>

Only dolphins killed for meat or captured for the live trade count towards the quota in Taiji. This underestimates the number of dolphins killed in the process of the hunts. The International Whaling Commission notes several issues producing "cryptic mortality" in Taiji including stress, serious injury, abortions, and post-release deaths.<sup>7</sup>

## Selection Process

The sale of dolphins to domestic and international dolphin entertainment venues is the profit driver of hunting dolphins in Taiji. As a result, the captive dolphin industry has become actively involved with these gruesome hunts.

According to credible eyewitnesses at the hunt, dolphin trainers are present on site to select the most profitable animals, primarily female unblemished bottlenose dolphins for sale to dolphin entertainment venues, both locally and globally.

While many of these trainers claim to be experts in dolphin welfare, they actively participate in the separation of close-knit family units and cannot be unaware of the visible and audible signs of distress from both slaughtered and captured dolphins.<sup>8</sup>

## Economics of the Taiji Dolphin Hunts

Taiji has a long history of whaling with the first commercial operations commencing in Japan in 1606.<sup>9</sup> However, the hunts for dolphins to supply dolphin wildlife entertainment venues began much later in the 1960s. The Taiji Whale Museum opened in 1969, signalling the start of a lucrative captive dolphin industry for the small town.<sup>10</sup>

The consumption of both whale and dolphin meat within Japan's population is so low it shows up as 0 in official statistics. Although some dolphin entertainment venues may claim they are saving dolphins from slaughter by offering captivity as a solution, it's important to note that dolphin meat is not as profitable.

In a rare interview, the Taiji dolphin hunters spoke with *The Guardian* in 2017 and revealed that "while dolphin meat for human consumption generates only modest profits" (around US\$500-\$600 per animal<sup>11</sup>), Taiji dolphin hunters can reportedly sell a live specimen to brokers for around US\$8,000, while a fully trained dolphin can then fetch more than US\$40,000 for the dolphin hunter.<sup>12</sup> Reliable anecdotal reports indicate that a dolphin can then sell for up to US\$150,000 when sold to an overseas dolphin entertainment venue.

This model of supplying dolphins to dolphin entertainment venues around the world, therefore, ensures the survival and continuation of these cruel hunts.



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**Image:** Taiji dolphin hunters pulling a net across the cove, trapping the dolphins.

# Links Between Taiji and Tourism

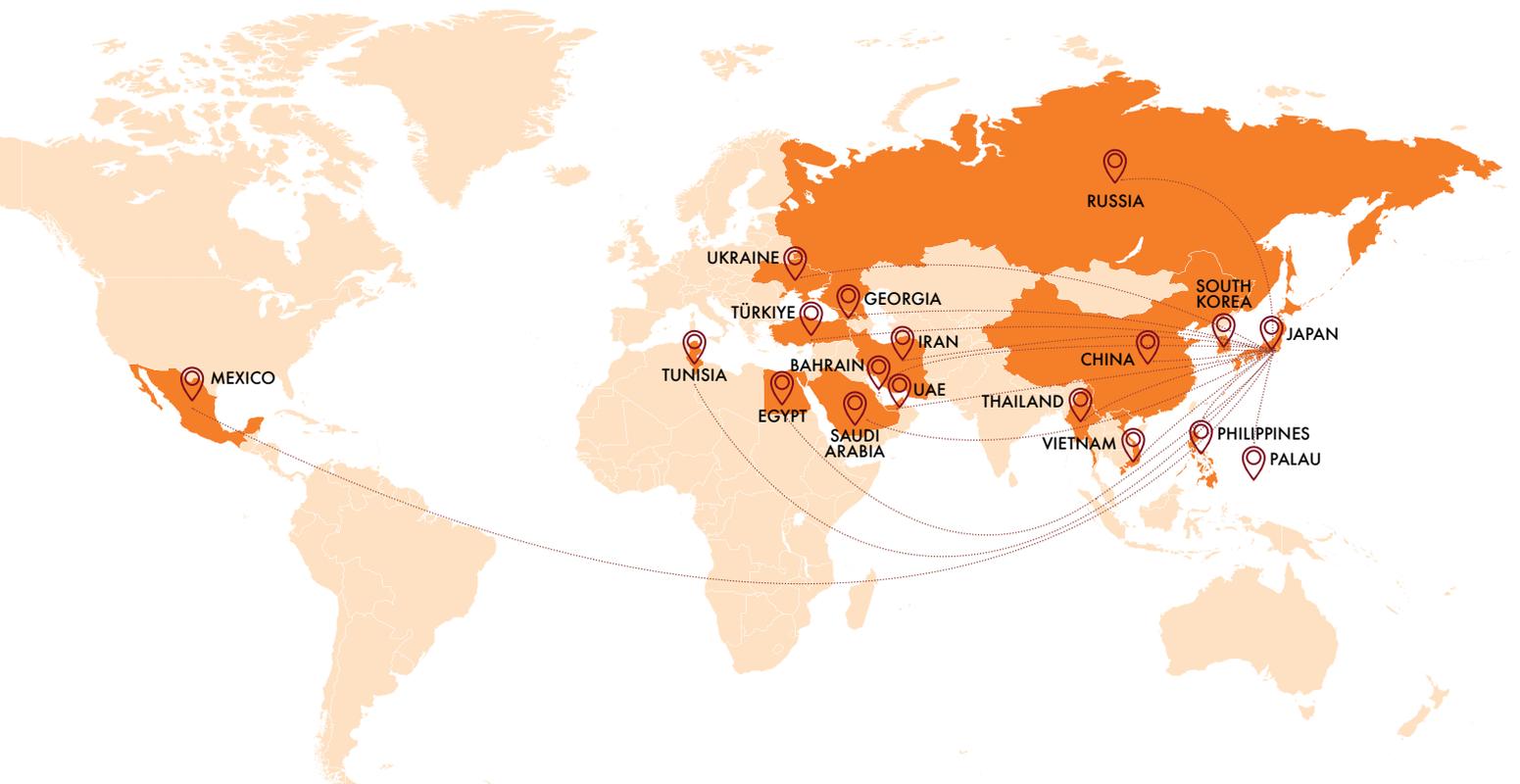
## Taiji Exports to Captive Dolphin Entertainment Venues

In 2023, World Animal Protection and Action for Dolphins conducted desktop research to identify countries and facilities that have purchased dolphins originating from Taiji's dolphin hunts. To achieve this, all entries on Cetabase - a comprehensive database that tracks live captures, transfers, births and deaths of dolphins and small whales - were collated.<sup>13</sup> This data was then compared with export records in the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna) database.

In Japan, several dolphin species are captured for display and entertainment purposes in these controversial hunts. Data shows that 1,010 dolphins or small whales were caught in during the 2020/21

hunts in Taiji. Of these, approximately 140 were taken alive for the dolphin entertainment industry and the rest were killed. Since the 2018/2019 hunts, 663\* animals have been captured live from the wild in Taiji, the majority of which were bottlenose dolphins to supply the lucrative captive dolphin entertainment industry.

Our desktop research, gathered from Cetabase, CITES and Japan's government statistics, shows wild-caught Taiji dolphins have been directly exported to 17 countries globally including China, Thailand, UAE, Vietnam, Philippines, South Korea, Mexico, Ukraine, Turkey, Georgia, Russia, Egypt, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iran and Palau, as well as being transported locally within Japan.



This map shows that Taiji dolphins have been exported to Mexico, Palau, Ukraine, Turkey, Georgia, Russia, Egypt, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iran, UAE, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, China and South Korea.



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\* While monitors of the cove do their best to report accurate numbers, there are presumably fatalities that aren't able to be viewed by the monitors who are positioned on shore. Young, old, injured or sick members of the pod may not be able to keep up during the roundup. Once on shore, the dolphin hunters and trainers have also started hiding the captures and slaughter with large tarpaulin covers due to the worldwide criticism of the hunts. While some information on the current status of the animals transported to dolphin entertainment venues is known, many have since died, been on traded to other venues or had their names changed, making tracking difficult.

**Image:** Tarpaulins cover area of the cove where dolphins are slaughtered, turning the sea red with blood.

## Further Trading

Taiji-caught dolphins have been exported to 17 countries and territories around the world. Further research indicates these dolphins have also been traded between dolphin entertainment venues and used for captive breeding, obscuring the direct link to Taiji's deadly dolphin hunts.<sup>14, 15</sup> There is nothing in CITES trade provisions to prevent this trade and live bottlenose dolphins are often traded between venues.<sup>16</sup>

A lack of transparency in the trading of wild-caught dolphins from Taiji and between dolphin entertainment venues provides an unsettling confusion over where these dolphins end up. As a result, tourists and travel companies may be unwittingly visiting and/or promoting and selling tickets to venues with dolphins sourced from these cruel hunts.

## Travel Companies and the Taiji Dolphin Hunts

Many members of the general public believe captures of wild dolphins are a thing of the past.<sup>17</sup> However, while dolphin entertainment venues in several countries state that they do not acquire dolphins from the wild, this is not representative of the dolphin entertainment industry globally. In fact, dolphins are still being captured from wild populations across the globe for use in the entertainment industry.

World Animal Protection assessed the dolphin-related activities and experiences sold by 17 global travel companies during September 2023 to February 2024 to find out if they offered tickets to dolphin entertainment venues linked to the inhumane Taiji dolphin hunts. In total, across the six travel companies that sell tickets to Taiji linked venues, there were 50 offerings (such as sales and packages) for such venues.

Five of the largest global travel companies that still sell captive wildlife entertainment, Trip.com, Klook, Traveloka, GetYourGuide and TUI were assessed in this review. Alarming, all five travel companies offer tickets to at least two such dolphin entertainment venues, while one was found offering tickets for up to a staggering 19 such venues. Of the total 17 travel companies assessed, six were found to be selling tickets to venues linked to purchasing dolphins originating from the Taiji dolphin hunts.

Positively, of the 17 companies we assessed, 11 companies did not sell tickets to Taiji linked dolphin entertainment venues and a few of these companies have developed progressive policies that avoid captive wildlife activities. Recent additions to the list of travel companies that do not sell captive dolphin entertainment are Tripadvisor, Booking.com, Airbnb, Virgin Holidays and British Airways Holidays.



## Travel companies selling tickets to venues linked to purchasing dolphins from Taiji dolphin hunts

**Trip.com**



**klook**



**traveloka**



**GET YOUR GUIDE**



**TUI**



**GROUPON**



These travel companies continue to sell captive dolphin venues, yet had no ticket sales to venues linked to Taiji dolphin hunts

**DER** | TRUSTED TRAVEL TEAM  
Touristik



These travel companies have committed to no longer sell or promote tickets to captive dolphin entertainment venues

 **AIR CANADA** **Jet2.com**  
Friendly low fares



These companies have animal welfare policies in place committing to no longer sell or promote tickets to venues that exploit any wild animals for entertainment

 **airbnb** **Booking.com**

 **BRITISH AIRWAYS**  
Holidays

 **Expedia**



 **Tripadvisor**

**viator**

**virgin atlantic holidays**



**Image:** Dolphins performing in circus style performances for tourists at a Taiji linked venue.

While World Animal Protection has attempted to engage with Trip.com, GetYourGuide, Traveloka and TUI, a number of times in the hopes of working together to implement wildlife-friendly policies, our advice has been ignored.

Trip.com, who tops our list in their sale of venues linked to Taiji dolphin hunts is one of the world's largest online travel agencies with over 400 million users worldwide. Trip.com describes itself as 'Your trusted trip companion' yet causes unimaginable suffering to wild animals including dolphins, elephants, primates and big cats by selling attractions that exploit wild animals for entertainment.

Meanwhile, GetYourGuide describe themselves as 'a revolutionary approach to tourism,' yet sell exploitative wildlife attractions across a wide range of wild animal species, including dolphins, elephants, primates and big cats.

Similarly, Traveloka continues to sell tickets to elephant rides and washing, petting orangutans, tiger cubs made to pose with tourists for selfies and swim-with-dolphin experiences.

TUI were once looking to be front-runners in animal welfare, being one of the first large travel companies to stop selling elephant rides. However, a decade later they continue to promote and sell tickets to captive dolphin entertainment venues and elephant washing and bathing experiences.

TUI Group currently sell around 20 dolphin venues, profiting from over 350 cetaceans.

Klook announced their first ever animal welfare policy in October 2023 that aimed to end the sale of circus-style shows and performances. However, this policy has not been fully implemented yet. Positively, efforts of World Animal Protection to engage with Klook regarding their continued sale of Taiji linked venues, has seen the travel company remove some Taiji linked venues. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the travel company still offered tickets to some venues.

Groupon deals are time-limited, meaning venues and offers change constantly with some of the most infamous wildlife entertainment venues offered. The travel company has been notified of their offering linked to the cruel Taiji hunts. However, they have not taken any action to remove this offering from their website as of the time of writing.

No travel company that sells captive dolphin entertainment can feel at ease about their links to Taiji – even if they are not listed above – since many of the dolphins caught during these hunts may end up being traded to other venues promoted and sold by these travel companies.

**It is vital that travel companies adopt and implement comprehensive policies that stop the sale and promotion of all captive wildlife experiences.**

# Tourism's Role in Taiji's Dolphin Hunts

There are hundreds of dolphin entertainment venues across the world. Travel companies and brands that promote and sell such venues play a huge role in perpetuating the ongoing exploitation of dolphins for human amusement.

**Any travel company promoting or selling captive dolphin entertainment is fuelling the demand for wild-caught dolphins for entertainment such as those captured in Taiji.**

By selling tickets to dolphin entertainment venues, the global travel industry is helping maintain those venues' social licence. Tourists often put their trust in major travel brands for advice and recommendations. The promotion and sale of wildlife entertainment venues can lead tourists to assume these attractions and activities are acceptable, or even beneficial for the animals themselves. It can also perpetuate the myth that dolphins are being held captive for the conservation of dolphin species.

It is important to remember that all exploitation of dolphins and other cetaceans for captive wildlife entertainment inherently involves animal suffering, whether those dolphins were wild caught or captive-bred.

## Tourist Entertainment is Driving Cruelty

As part of World Animal Protection's ongoing 'Wildlife. Not Entertainers.' campaign, the previous report 'Behind the Smile' represents the first comprehensive assessment of the global dolphin entertainment industry and the links between the tourism industry and keeping dolphins in captivity.<sup>18</sup>

While dolphin entertainment venues may claim to improve the lives of captive cetaceans by keeping them safe from the threats of the ocean, even the highest-welfare captivity cannot meet the complex needs of these animals that have evolved to survive and thrive in wild conditions.

Cetacean intelligence and longevity form the backbone of the ethical arguments against keeping these animals in captivity irrespective of whether they are captive-born or taken from the wild. Ironically, the intelligence of dolphins is often highlighted by dolphin entertainment venues as they demonstrate the ability of dolphins to respond to commands and perform complex choreography. There is a large body of evidence examining the sophistication of cetacean cognition with the majority focusing on bottlenose dolphins as the most common research subjects.<sup>19</sup>

Dolphins in the wild may swim up to 100 km in a day and can deep dive many metres. Even in the largest captive facilities, dolphins have access to less than 1/10,000 of 1% (0.000001%) of the space available to them in their natural environment.<sup>20</sup> Dolphins in captivity are often restricted to swimming in circles because of this. Such behaviour – known as 'stereotypical behaviour' – is a sign the dolphin is suffering psychologically.<sup>21</sup> For an inquisitive and intelligent creature like the dolphin, a barren tank offers no exploratory stimuli compared to the vast, complex ocean.

Water treatment methods such as ozonation and chlorination are used in the dolphin tanks. These maintain the water clarity needed for visitors to see the animals clearly and neutralise the bacteria from large quantities of animal waste products. The use of harsh chemicals like these can cause an array of health issues for dolphins, particularly of the eyes and skin.<sup>22</sup>

In the wild, dolphins and other cetaceans get all their water content from the fish and squid they hunt. However, in captivity, their food lacks nutritional and



**Image:** Dolphins floating in small barren pools at a Taiji linked venue.

water content after being frozen and thawed. Even when fish species like capelin are used for feeding dolphins due to their high water content, there is still an ongoing risk of dehydration.<sup>23</sup>

**As long as captive dolphin shows and interactions are promoted as a fun experience, dolphins will continue to be bred into captivity or captured from the wild for profit-driven captive wildlife entertainment venues all over the world.**

## Captive Breeding

In the wild, dolphin calves stay with their mother for three to six years.<sup>24</sup> They are complex social animals and their behavioural development throughout their youth covers far more than just predator avoidance and foraging skills. Their social behaviour constantly develops at different ages and requires a healthy family and pod structure. Mental and physical stimulations, including learning how to avoid predators, can lead to the development of diverse and complex behaviours.<sup>25</sup>

Captive breeding is managed or prevented according to a venue's requirements. Inbreeding

is a real concern for many facilities because of the artificial group structure and thus natural reproduction is often replaced with artificial insemination.

Artificial insemination often requires female dolphins to be drugged with diazepam (the generic of Valium) prior to the procedure.<sup>26</sup>

Many dolphin entertainment venues attempt to justify their captive breeding practices by claiming to be involved in the conservation of dolphins. However, bottlenose dolphins, the most common species held in captivity, are not threatened in the wild and are listed as of "least concern" on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN's) Red List.<sup>27</sup>

It is also worth noting that wildlife entertainment venues often promote themselves as generating funds for conservation programmes, but the reality is that only 5 to 10% of zoos, dolphin entertainment venues, and aquaria are involved in substantial conservation programmes.<sup>28</sup> Captive breeding is just a way to produce more animals who can be exploited for tourist entertainment.

## Signs of Industry Change

In 2022, World Animal Protection commissioned a global consumer survey with 23,726 participants aged 16+ across 15 countries. The results revealed that 79% of the participants would rather see a dolphin in the wild than in a captive environment. This is a clear indication of the public's strong desire to see these intelligent marine mammals living freely in the wild, not in captivity.

A dolphin's 'smile' (a result of the shape of its jaw, not its emotional state) paints a skewed picture of their life in captivity. This contributes to the misconception that captive dolphins enjoy a happy life, creating a lack of awareness and clarity regarding the true impact of exploiting animals and keeping them in captivity. Despite this, only 33% of participants polled in 2022 agreed that wild animals would enjoy close encounters and interactions with humans, indicating a move away from the acceptability of close encounter experiences.

82% of participants believed that tour operators should not sell activities that cause suffering to wild animals. The survey also found 38% of the participants would avoid travel companies who were profiting from selling venues associated with animal cruelty.

Many travel companies that have decided to end their relationships with dolphin entertainment venues have done so due to the lack of progress within the dolphin entertainment industry and the growing body of scientific evidence that suggests captive cetaceans have poor welfare. 'Responsible tourism' is an increasingly popular term now used in the travel industry, and the concept is becoming more and more important to tourists.<sup>29</sup>

In response to the mounting evidence of the animal welfare impacts of wildlife in entertainment, a growing number of travel companies have been moved to protect wildlife such as dolphins by removing wildlife entertainment offerings and adopting wildlife-friendly policies.

The most important step necessary for the long-term protection of cetacean welfare is to put an end to wild capture and captive breeding. Leadership and change within the travel industry are critical to bringing this about.

## CONSUMER POLLING

**79%** of participants  stated they would rather **see a dolphin in the wild** than in a captive environment.

Only **33%** of participants  agreed that **wild animals would enjoy close encounters** and interactions with humans.

**82%** of participants  believed that **tour operators should not sell activities** that cause suffering to wild animals.

**38%** of participants  would **avoid travel companies who were profiting** from selling venues associated with animal cruelty.



**Image:** Large crowds gather to watch dolphins perform at a Taiji linked venue.

# Conclusion

This report highlights the links between the inhumane dolphin hunts in Taiji, Japan and the captive dolphin industry. While the tourism industry has remained largely unconnected to these hunts within the public domain, this report details how travel companies are selling tickets to venues that have purchased animals originating from these dolphin hunts and are therefore profiting off the horrific cruelty.

It cannot be emphasised enough that every ticket to a dolphin entertainment venue sold by a travel organisation and purchased by a member of the public contributes to the suffering of dolphins. Each ticket sold provides venues with the economic incentive to capture or breed more dolphins, resulting in up to 50 years of an individual dolphin's suffering.

It is critical to recognise that the dolphin captivity industry, like any other business, is based on supply and demand. Therefore, reducing consumer demand is key. Travel companies must take responsibility and stop offering activities involving dolphins as this contributes to the public assumption that these activities are acceptable.

The release of this report serves as a notice to all travel companies to urgently stop selling tickets to dolphin entertainment venues. It is imperative that these companies prioritise animal welfare by implementing robust policies to prevent the perpetuation of captive wildlife attractions.

As tourists or as travel companies, we can all play our part to protect dolphins - to help keep them thriving in the wild, where they belong.

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