

Dolphin 'therapy' a dangerous fad, Emory researchers warn

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People suffering from chronic mental or physical disabilities should not resort to a dolphin "healing" experience, warn two researchers from Emory University. Lori Marino, senior lecturer in the Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology Program, has teamed with Scott Lilienfeld, professor in the Department of Psychology, to launch an educational campaign countering claims made by purveyors of what is known as dolphin-assisted therapy (DAT).

"Dolphin-assisted therapy is not a valid treatment for any disorder," says Marino, a leading dolphin and whale researcher. "We want to get the word out that it's a lose-lose situation for people and for dolphins."

While swimming with dolphins may be a fun, novel experience, no scientific evidence exists for any long-term benefit from DAT, Marino says. She adds that people who spend thousands of dollars for DAT don't just lose out financially but they put themselves, and the dolphin, at risk of injury or infection. And they are supporting an industry that outside of the United States takes dolphins from the wild in a brutal process that often leaves several dolphins dead for every surviving captive.

Marino and Lilienfeld reviewed five studies published during the past eight years and found that the claims for efficacy for DAT were invalid. Their conclusions were published recently in *Anthrozoös*, the journal of the International Society for Anthrozoology, in a paper entitled "Dolphin-Assisted Therapy: More Flawed Data and More Flawed Conclusions."

"We found that all five studies were methodologically flawed and plagued by several threats to both internal and construct validity," wrote Marino and Lilienfeld, who conducted a similar review in 1998. "We conclude that nearly a decade following our initial review, there remains no compelling evidence that DAT is a legitimate therapy, or that it affords any more than fleeting improvements in mood."

An upcoming issue of the newsletter of the American Psychological Association's Division of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities will feature another article by Marino and Lilienfeld, entitled "Dolphin-Assisted Therapy for Autism and Other Developmental Disorders: A Dangerous Fad."

"We want to reach psychologists with this message, because DAT is increasingly being applied to children with developmental disabilities, although there is no good evidence that it works," said Lilienfeld, a clinical psychologist. "It's hard to imagine the rationale for a technique that, at best, makes a child feel good in the short run, but could put the child at risk of harm."

The Emory scientists have timed their campaign to coincide with a recent call by two UK-based non-profits – the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society and Research Autism – to ban the practice of DAT.

While Marino is against taking dolphins from the wild and holding them captive for any purpose, she finds DAT especially egregious, because the people who are being exploited are the most vulnerable – including desperate parents who are willing to try anything to help a child with a disability.

Many people are under the impression that dolphins would never harm a human. "In reality, injury is a very real possibility when you place a child

in a tank with a 400-pound wild animal that may be traumatized from being captured," Marino says.

Dolphins are bred in captivity in U.S. marine parks, but in other countries they are often taken from the wild. "If people knew how these animals were captured, I don't think they would want to swim with them in a tank or participate in DAT," Marino says, referring to an annual "dolphin drive" in Japan. "During the dolphin drives hundreds of animals are killed, or panicked and die of heart attacks, in water that's red with their blood, while trainers from facilities around the world pick out young animals for their marine parks. They hoist them out of the water, sometimes by their tail flukes, and take them away."

Each live dolphin can bring a fisherman \$50,000 or more, she says. "The marine parks make millions off of dolphins, so that's a drop in the bucket. It's an irony that dolphins are among the most beloved, and the most exploited, animals in the world," Marino says.

Source: Emory University

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