

Guest Column for *Dolphins Gazette*

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In the course of my film work, I have had the opportunity to swim with wild dolphins in the Bahamas, Tahiti, Hawaii, and other places. Those are memories I will never forget. However, there is an increasing problem worldwide of people harassing dolphins by attempting to interact so closely with them. They are powerful wild animals, graceful and mysterious, and like the wolf or the grizzly bear, deserve to have undisturbed habitat. Dolphins exist for themselves, not for us.

The future of dolphins, as well as their home – oceans and coastal waterways – depends wholly on the actions of the most feared predator on the planet: man. The National Wildlife Federation has been active for many years working to prevent the drowning of dolphins in purse seine nets used in the Eastern Tropical Pacific Ocean to harvest yellowfin tuna. And through our Keep the Wild Alive Campaign, we are working hard to protect dolphins and many other species. At least seven species of dolphins are endangered – and human behavior is the cause.

From a dolphin's point of view, the world is a dangerous place, and threats are manifold. Pollution and habitat degradation are two of the biggest threats. Coastlines are heavily settled. Ship channels are polluted with petroleum-stained waters and toxic discharges. Offshore waters are affected by agricultural and urban runoff. Shorelines, with their protective mangrove forests and seagrass, are being torn up for marinas and resorts. Dolphins are losing clean living space and a food supply.

Chemicals washed into the rivers and seas work their way up the food chain. Dolphins, as top predators, ingest large amounts of fish daily, and chemical levels can build up in their bodies.

With a coat of blubber that protects them from cold, dolphins are especially vulnerable because they absorb toxic pollutants in this band of fat. When a dolphin has to call upon its bodily food stores, as in times of stress, the pollutants are released into its system. Beluga whales in the heavily industrialized St. Lawrence River between the United States and Canada are down to 500 animals from a population that once numbered about 5,000. The dead that have washed ashore have been found to contain such high levels of heavy metals, PCBs, and DDE, that their bodies are treated as toxic waste. Periodic die-offs have affected its populations in the North Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico.

Commercial fishing nets are another problem. Although the situation has improved in recent years, two types of nets – drift and purse seine nets – spelled doom for millions of dolphins that ended up as bycatch. Drift nets can extend up to a terrifying 40 miles.

Perhaps the most preventable threat is inappropriate human interactions. At a resort on Shark Bay in western Australia, about half a dozen female dolphins are regularly fed by tourists.

Ostensibly wild dolphins, they are now habituated to humans. A recent report cites declines in the survival rates of calves born to these mothers. In one case, a shark attacked a newborn while its mother was seeking handouts on the beach. Elsewhere in the world, wild dolphins have been known to ram and bite people who got too close. In one case in Brazil, a dolphin killed a man who was harassing it.

Feeding, irresponsible swimming with wild dolphins, noise, collisions between boats and dolphins, trashing the waterways, and human crowding and harassment, all threaten the independence of these wild animals. This is one area in which individuals can really make a difference.

The simple refusal of large numbers of people to buy tuna that have been caught by harming dolphins forced fishermen of many nations to change their methods. Because of consumer pressure, millions of dolphins have been saved, although continued vigilance is necessary.

Dolphins are incredible and fascinating marine mammals. They are sublimely beautiful and social, and deserve our highest respect. For us to degrade their habitat, and thus to threaten and hurt them, is totally unacceptable. Their fate is up to us.