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Release of Cetaceans

In recent years, the public and media interest of reintroducing cetaceans under human care to the wild has been a topic of much discussion. Georgia Aquarium staff members have been active in the rescue, rehabilitation and release of various marine mammal species (including whales and dolphins) that have been under short-term human care for over 30 years. While scientific protocols for releasing short-term rescued and rehabilitated cetaceans have been developed to ensure that survivability is optimized, the scientific literature for releasing cetaceans under long-term human care is sparse and the results of the few scientifically conducted release projects report widely different results. Issues of concern in long-term situations include disease transmission between released animals and wild animals; the unwanted genetic exchange between the released cetacean and wild stocks; the elimination of behaviors developed in human care that could affect negatively impact survivability; and the ability of the released animal to adequately forage for itself, defend itself from predators and be integrated into a social group (Bossart, 1996; Spradlin and Terbush, 1999). Because of many of the above issues, the length of time under human care becomes an important consideration in any release protocol. Importantly, a study published regarding reintroduction of US Navy dolphins to the wild concluded that the benefits of reintroduction to either reintroduced animals or the indigenous populations could neither be predicted nor adequately quantified and that significant mortality risks existed to both the released animals and the wild stocks (Brill and Friedl, 1993).

Specifically, the reintroduction of the Russian beluga whales could negatively impact their health for behavioral and medical reasons. Specifically, many of the emerging and resurging marine mammal diseases we now see in some free-ranging marine mammal populations are not observed in marine mammals under human care (see disease references below). Thus, any translocation attempt could negatively impact the health of the reintroduced whales. Additionally, any translocation attempt could also inadvertently impact the well being of the free-ranging beluga whale population in which they are placed. Free-ranging wildlife populations including marine mammals have developed immunologic tolerance to a host of microorganisms that now live as commensals in their bodies including in the respiratory and gastrointestinal tracts. Alternatively, marine mammals under human care have developed immunologic tolerance to wide range of different microorganisms that now live as commensals in their bodies. The immunologic tolerance to different microorganisms is obviously adaptive and evolved slowly over time and is not an uncommon phenomenon in other mammalian species. Immunologic naivety to these new, different and potentially undefined organisms which in turn become opportunistic pathogens have the potential to negatively impact the health of the free-ranging beluga whale population as well as any reintroduced beluga whales. Precedent has been observed with similar disease outbreaks in humans and other wild animal species that have undergone various aspects of environmental translocation.

The length of time under human care also becomes a complicating variable for potentiating the health issues of concern for any successful reintroduction. In this case, the now normal microbial populations in the beluga whales housed near the Black Sea have microbes common to that geographic region only. Unfortunately, one additional complicating factor is the limited comparable health data of the free-ranging beluga populations in question. This health data would be critical for understanding disease transmission potential between both the reintroduced animals and the indigenous populations.

Specific behavioral issues of concern in this case would include that during their time in human care the beluga whales in question have been largely desensitized to humans and dependent on humans for their basic functions of life. As in other failed release attempts, released animals no longer have a healthy inherent fear of humans and engage humans in the search of food. In the worst case scenario, these animals would be unable to feed themselves and actually search out humans for companionship. Additionally, the social relationships of the reintroduced animals and the indigenous populations are difficult to determine and could cause unpredictable social consequences to the detriment of either group.

Probably the most infamous example of similar behavioral/social difficulties occurred with the failed tragic release attempt of the killer whale “Keiko”, the star of the movie “Free Willy”. According to Mark Simmons, noted marine mammal behaviorist and naturalist and the author of ‘Killing Keiko”, the release of “Keiko” who had been under long-term human care was not successful nor was he ever free (Simmons, 2014). “Keiko” never acquired skills to survive on his own, continued to seek out human interaction to his final days, never integrated with wild whales and died from improper and negligent care. According to Simmons, Keiko’s final years and days were cruel and unusual and constitute perhaps the most infamous case of animal exploitation and animal abuse in marine zoological history. This tragedy highlights that we must remember that our generous, human compassion for animals is not always well-conceived. We need to better understand what our actions actually mean for such animals as opposed to what they mean for ourselves or our agendas. While returning stranded marine mammals that have been rehabilitated is usually a compassionate act, there is no reason to abandon animals that have long depended on human care.

Based on these medical, social and behavioral issues of concern we do not consider the beluga whales in question to be reintroduction candidates.

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