

THE DOLPHIN FISHERY IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

BY THE DEPARTMENT OF FISHERIES & MARINE RESOURCES OF SOLOMON ISLANDS

Introduction

Porpoise/dolphin harvesting and utilization has a long history in the Solomon Islands. In parts of Malaita, porpoise/dolphin hunting continues as a traditional activity. These communities had been utilizing porpoise/dolphin meat as a source of protein food and the teeth as traditional money for decades. Before the influence of commercialization, most of the traditional values were attached to bartering between coastal people (so called “saltwater” people) and inland people (the ‘bush’ people), where porpoise/dolphin or dugong meat is traded in return for root crops. As traditional money, porpoise/dolphin teeth is [sic]used in paying bride prices, compensation, settling of disputes, purchasing of land and various agricultural produce. Hunting has been an integral part of the annual cycle of life in these areas, a centre of social and ritual activity and a bridge between the human and the supernatural. Additionally, porpoise teeth are also used in decorations and as ornaments. Although the porpoise/dolphin fishery is principally subsistence in nature, increasingly, trading of porpoise/dolphin meat is now reaching Honiara markets for cash income.

The mere fact that an activity is traditional should not confer acceptable or protected status upon it. The fact is that many traditional activities have since been determined to be inhumane or unsustainable or both. If a traditional hunt is truly for subsistence purposes, then all efforts should be made to ensure that the hunt is both truly sustainable and as humane as possible. However, almost all hunts for wildlife with commercial elements eventually result in over-exploitation. The Solomon Islands apparently has no scientific documentation to verify the sustainability of the dolphin hunts conducted in its waters.

The Department of Fisheries and Marine Resources is fully aware of the large number of criticisms and allegations leveled at it by environmentalists, animal rights activists (and lovers) and individuals both locally and overseas with regard to the capture and export of dolphins. Everyday the Department is bombarded with e-mails and faxes on this issue. The local media (both print and radio) also carry letters, articles and items on the issue almost on a daily basis.

Whilst everyone is free to express their opinions and views on any issue, they must be also mindful of the responsibilities carried with exercising such right, one of which is that the opinions and views expressed must be based on facts and be constructive. As a matter of fact, most if not all opinions and views received so far on the dolphin issue, in the view of the Department, are dictated more by personal emotions rather than anything else. They demonstrated a high degree of biasness [sic] and misconstrued propaganda. Though 95% of the allegations and media information are pure lies, the Department respects and appreciates all views and opinions expressed and will always welcome constructive ones.

The purpose of this press statement is not to invite unnecessary debate on this issue but rather, an opportunity whereby this Department will clarify the issues raised and to demonstrate the government's responsibility in ensuring that country's renewable resources (in this case, porpoise/dolphins) are not only protected but are also conserved through their proper and sustainable utilization for the benefit of its people and country.

The Status of Marine Mammals

Like many other resources we have in Solomon Islands, the status of marine mammals is not fully known. However, it is estimated that at least 13 species of porpoise/dolphins occur in the Solomon Islands waters (Hill, 1989).

Three communities on Malaita are involved in traditional dolphin hunting. They are Fanalei/Walande in the Southern part of the island, Bitā'ama/Taeloa in the northwest and Sulufou in the northeast. There is anecdotal information that each of these communities kill between 200 and 500 dolphins on any one hunting season. In addition to the above, the Rumahui, Star Harbour and Ulawa communities in the Makira/Ulawa are also known to involve in traditional dolphin hunting.

If the Solomon Islands authorities do not know the species involved in these traditional hunts, then they obviously cannot say if this level of exploitation is sustainable. Dolphin and porpoise species are not interchangeable and in fact must be managed within species by stocks – adjacent stocks do not interbreed or intermingle (by definition) and therefore the removal of animals from one stock will not be replaced by animals from another. There may very well be more than one bottlenose dolphin stock in the waters surrounding the Solomon Islands.

Solomon Islands is not alone in the utilization of marine mammals. There are many countries that kill these animals either directly or indirectly. A few examples that may be used to illustrate this will include United States of America whereby, under approval by the International Whaling Commission (IWC), allows the Eskimos of Alaska to kill certain amount of bowhead and gray whales each year, Canada, a non IWC member kills about 700 beluga whales out of 7000 every year. In the neighbouring Australia, the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are allowed to kill and use dugongs (pers. Comm. Ted Hammond1).

This paragraph has misleading and incorrect information. One, while the U.S. does permit, with IWC approval, an aboriginal subsistence hunt for bowhead and gray whales, the quotas are determined to be sustainable using the latest population estimates (calculated based on both visual and acoustic surveys using established scientific methodologies) and are subsistence in nature (no commercial elements involving meat or other edible products are allowed – this is both under U.S. domestic law and IWC regulations). Canada's quota for beluga whales is not 10% of the population, as this would be completely unsustainable. Regarding the dugong hunt, once again, this is a subsistence hunt. The Solomon Islands hunt, by the ministers' own admission above, has commercial elements developing (and certainly the live capture of dolphins in question here is solely commercial in nature) and has been issued a quota without sufficient knowledge of population numbers to know if it is 10% or 1% or even 100% of the local dolphin stock.

Management Principles and the Precautionary Approach

The Department's development and management principle has always been 'sustainable utilization' of the country's aquatic resources. This is to be based on scientific or best information available. Where such information is not available, the Fisheries Act 1998 stipulated that a precautionary approach may be taken. In this case, the Department has opted to apply the precautionary approach to the management of dolphins and marine mammals in Solomon Islands. An export quota of 100 animals (dolphins) per year is set and this is based

on the best information available (anecdotal and community interview information). This quota is annual and subject to review thus can be altered accordingly (or as and when necessary) as more data becomes available. In addition to other sources of funding currently sought by the Department to carry out appropriate studies on the resource, a chargeable levy on exports will be used for this purposely [sic] also.

An export quota of 100 dolphins per year (especially without specifying the species) cannot be called precautionary when nothing is known of the dolphin population's status. The status of the species and stocks mentioned above for the cetacean hunts of other nations are generally based on some science – again, by their own admission, the Solomon Islands authorities have not based their dolphin export quota on scientific information at all. “Anecdotal and community interview information” is wholly inadequate to the task of making a sustainability determination, as competent wildlife management authorities know well. Community (local) knowledge can supplement scientific information but it cannot substitute for it.

Responsible Authority

One of the questions commonly raised by people with regard to the dolphin issue is that of “Responsible Authority”. The responsibility or the authority to manage marine mammals lies with the Department of Fisheries and Marine Resources. This Department has always been responsible for the management of cetaceans, which include dolphins and porpoises. Section 2 of the Fisheries Act 1998, clearly defined ‘fish’ to include any aquatic animal, whether piscine or not. The fact that dolphins are aquatic animals brings such species under the jurisdiction of the Department.

It is of serious concern to hear that “fish” in Solomon Islands law is defined as any aquatic animal. While it is reasonable for marine mammals and fish (let alone sea turtles, invertebrates, and other marine life) to be managed by the same government authority or agency (this is the case in many nations, including the U.S.), mammals and fish are usually managed separately within said agency, as they are recognized in definitions and regulations as having highly divergent biology. Including cetaceans under the definition of “fish” in the law suggests a lack of acknowledgment of this important distinction and can have negative management consequences for both types of animals.

Validity of the Gavutu Operation

The Solomon Islands Marine Mammal Education Centre (SIMMEC) has gone through and met all the legal requirements of the Solomon Islands. They obtained the relevant fisheries licence after having satisfied all Foreign Investment Board requirements. The licence issued to SIMMEC is for the company to operate the facility at Gavutu and to purchase dolphin [sic] from local fishermen only but not to hunt for dolphins.

The permit held by SIMMEC was issued in 2002 under s.32 of the Fisheries Act 1998 which allows for the export of live fish. It was issued at a time when a more detailed and species-based set of regulations were still in the formulation and drafting process. The powers inferred from s.32 renders the permit legal and effective, as it is wide in scope to cover dolphins.

Again, including mammals under a regulation that allows for the export of live “fish” is of serious concern. This is non-precautionary, as, among other differences, mammals and fish have highly different reproductive outputs. The process for determining quotas for fish should and would be completely different from the process for mammals.

Another common concern always raised with regard to s.32 is that concerning “assessment” of the resource before the granting of permit for import or export. Section 32 of the Fisheries Act does not make it compulsory for an “Impact Assessment” to be carried out before granting of a permit. It is within the discretion of The Director to determine what form of assessment, if necessary and practical is to be undertaken. In the case of SIMMEC, practical difficulties had prevented a scientific assessment to be carried out at short notice. Nonetheless, an interview assessment has been done prior to the granting of permit and a quota was determined as a precautionary approach as specified under s.4(c). Therefore, the decision taken here is based on the relevant provisions under the Fisheries Act 1998 particularly s.32 and s.4(c).

Apparently, the Solomon Islands authorities are of the opinion that if an activity is legal under domestic law, then it is both precautionary and sustainable and should be accepted by other nations. However, one does not necessarily follow the other – in fact, in this case it clearly does not. The above admission merely confirms the opinion of environmental groups and the authorities of some other nations that the permitting process in the Solomon Islands, while legal under domestic law, is inadequate under international law and is neither precautionary nor sustainable. The ministers’ statement has admitted that environmental assessments are not required when capture permits are issued. It has admitted that only an interview assessment was conducted (no scientific assessment was done) to determine the sustainability of these captures. It has admitted that authorities issued permits and licenses applying standards that do not meet those of CITES. Therefore, no CITES party should trade with this nation in dolphins.

The Quota

The Department believed that the annual export quota of 100 dolphins is precautionary in itself. It would have been worth criticizing an open system whereby no quota or limit is set, thus allowing a permit holder to capture and export as many dolphins as he can in any year. The current quota is thus based on the best information available to the Director of this Department at this point in time. In deciding this quota, the following considerations were taken into account.

1) **Anecdotal information.** It is estimated that between 200 and 500 animals are caught per season per community by the main dolphin hunting communities in Solomon Islands.

This information does not specify species, sex, age, or any other relevant biological information. In short, this information, in combination with the lack of knowledge about population numbers, cannot be used to determine sustainability.

2) **The use of catches.** At times a proportion of the catch has to be discarded especially when there was an excessive catch. In such cases, the head of the animals were cut off and kept for their teeth and the rest of the body thrown away. A

proportion of the resource is wasted during successful hunting seasons. Wouldn't it be better if such excessive catch is utilized?

Excessive catch is by definition unsustainable (and therefore undesirable). The Solomon Islands authorities appear to be condoning excessive take, suggesting that only if it is wasted is it bad. Most management regimes distinguish between waste and sustainability as two separate concepts. Indeed, wasted or utilized, excessive take is damaging to a species or stock. Excessive take should be discouraged and ultimately prevented, not accepted as long as it is non-wasteful.

3) **Licence condition.** The licence issued to the operator has specific conditions that are being monitored by this Department. Among others (such as according the animals the highest level of humane treatment), the quota is one of these. Strictly, the quota is annual. This means, it is subjected to review and appropriate alteration as and when necessary depending on the availability of relevant data.

4) **Licence restriction.** The Department restricts and controls the number of licence [sic] to be issued. At the moment, exporting of dolphins is restricted to one operator only.

It is worthwhile to note that about 300,000 dolphins and other marine mammals are caught and discarded by purse seine fishing fleets each year (BBC World - 24th July 2003). In the eastern Pacific Ocean alone, the current dolphin mortality rate associated with tuna purse seining is approximately 2000 each year (IATTC2 Report, 2002). The same report also stated that results from abundance surveys undertaken by the SWFSC3 indicate that the dolphin stocks in the eastern Pacific have been stable or increasing for more than 20 years. This result is similar to anecdotal information gathered by this Department that dolphin catches by hunting communities within Solomon Islands have been stable for many years. The Department believes that the taking of 100 animals should not be a real concern here if someone from Solomon Islands and the country as a whole benefits from it as opposed to the number of discards by fishing fleets as noted above. Similarly, it is gathered from empirical [sic] knowledge and observation that dolphin abundance and the recruitment rate in our waters is relatively higher than most other parts of the world. Given this situation, wouldn't it be better for Solomon Islanders to exploit this abundant resource for economic returns so long as it is done sustainably?

This paragraph contains numerous errors and statements without scientific merit. First, the number of cetaceans reported killed by the BBC referred to all fishing methods, not just purse seine fishing. Regardless, the total number of cetaceans killed by one method of fishing in other parts of the world is irrelevant to the sustainability of the take of a local stock of dolphins. Second, the level of lethal take in the tuna purse seine fishery in the eastern Pacific Ocean – of stocks and species completely different from the one in question – is determined through almost 100% observer coverage and required reporting, unlike in the Solomon Islands, where anecdotal reports from the fishermen themselves are being used to determine the level of take. Indeed, the level of actual take in the Solomon Islands may be far higher than is being reported in interviews.

Third, the SWFSC (Southwest Fisheries Science Center of the United States National Marine Fisheries Service) has in fact determined that dolphin population levels in the eastern Pacific have remained stable or have decreased (not increased, as stated above) in the last 20 years

– during a period of declining mortality that should have seen increasing population levels. In addition, the SWFSC determined this result after years of conducting systematic transect surveys – the anecdotal and interview information upon which the Solomon Islands has relied is not comparable. Fourth, the economic benefit from a take is of limited relevance if the take is unsustainable – eventually the “resource” will collapse and the economy of a community that has come to rely on that resource will also collapse.

Finally, the statement that local dolphin abundance and recruitment rate information in the Solomon Islands is based on empirical evidence contradicts the earlier admission that all information on the local dolphin population has been gathered via interviews. There have been no publications identified reporting this empirical evidence – if publications exist, the Solomon Islands authorities should produce them immediately.

The Solomon Islands ministers’ statement has compared apples and oranges in this statement. The status of other species and stocks, subject to other mortality factors, is irrelevant to the status of the bottlenose dolphins in question. The disturbing levels of cetacean mortality in other fisheries and regions are worthy of condemnation and concern, but have no bearing on the sustainability of the take in the Solomon Islands. The ministers’ statement appears to be saying that a take of 100 dolphins in the Solomon Islands is minor compared to a take of 300,000 dolphins in global fisheries. However, concern should be focused on the proportion of the total population that a take represents, not on an absolute number. Perhaps there are only 300 dolphins in the Solomon Islands stock in question (meaning 100 is fully a third of it) – or perhaps there are 3000. The point is, the population number is unknown and therefore the proportion represented by 100 is also unknown (but could be substantial).

CITES

Many people have raised concerns relating to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Solomon Islands is yet to be a signatory of this Convention. However, despite this, the government has always adhered to the requirements of this Convention when exporting listed species (resources) in the past. The recent export of 28 dolphins to Mexico is one such example. The government is aware of important obligations that CITES member countries have under the Convention and specifically with regard to the export of listed species under the Convention. Frankly, Solomon Islands as a non-member of CITES is not obligated by the requirement of the Convention but due to its concern for the proper conservation of its natural resources for future generations, it has, as noted above, always adhered to CITES requirements.

This statement is false. By its own admission – not requiring environmental assessments and relying on anecdotal and interview information rather than scientific studies when making its non-detriment finding – the Solomon Islands does not adhere to CITES requirements. In addition, while the Solomon Islands is not required to adhere to CITES regulations in general, if it trades with CITES parties, then it is obligated to meet standards comparable to CITES requirements – because the CITES party with which it is trading must require it to do so.

Dolphin Safe

An allegation by animal activists and individuals is that the dolphin export from Solomon

Islands will have damaging repercussion on the dolphin safe trademark displayed on our tuna products and the tuna industry as a whole. Whilst it is true to say that dolphins are sometimes found in association with schools of tuna (the reason why many dolphins are caught and killed unnecessarily in purse seine nets), the Department can assure the public that this does not occur in the western Pacific. The dolphin safe trademark relates to the fishing method employed by the company to catch tuna. Soltai Fishing Company Ltd display this trademark on their product because the main fishing method used to catch tuna for their canned tuna products (Solomon Blue, Chilli Tuna, etc) i.e. "Pole and Line" is dolphin safe. In fact, this method is 100% dolphin safe. In addition, the fishery in Solomon Islands does not make its sets on dolphins as in the Eastern Pacific but rather on free schools or on floating logs and Fish Aggregation Devices (FADs). These facts will render further support to dolphin trademark of Soltai Fishing Company Limited.

The Gavutu Facility

On 2nd August, 2003, a team from the Department of Fisheries and Marine Resources visited and inspected the dolphin holding facility at Gavutu to ascertain the validity of the numerous allegations leveled against the operation by environmentalists and animal rights activists and individuals. A representative from the Australian Diplomatic mission was also present as an independent observer, so was an international consultant who is a specialist on dolphins. During this visit, the facility was assessed in two important areas. First, whether the facility meets international recognized standards and second, the level of animal stress and risk at the facility.

The Department was satisfied that the facility, as it now stands, meets the Animal & Plant Health Inspection Services (APHIS) standard of the United States even at low tide. In addition, the facility also satisfies the Australian and European animal care standards at high tide but may not be during low tide. However, the Department understands that since this is a newly established investment, it would take some time for the facility to meet the requirements of these two standards during low tide as well. Steps are currently being undertaken (improvement) by the operator to address this requirement. (Copies of these standards are available with the Department). Furthermore, the Department is also satisfied that there were [sic] no evidence of 200 dolphins being kept in captivity at the facility as widely reported in the media. There were only 39 bottlenose dolphins kept at the facility.

This paragraph is misleading – the APHIS standards involve far more than minimum depth requirements. This paragraph implies that the facility complies with all APHIS standards for dolphin holding facilities, but this is clearly untrue. Looking at photographs, the facility does not appear to meet volume standards for the number of dolphins held in each subdivided enclosure. From reports, it also does not meet water quality standards or other requirements, such as those related to record keeping, veterinary care, and food preparation.

The level of stress and risk to animals was assessed in light of the following key areas. (a) Feed (b) Water flow (c) Bacterial level (d) Animal care (in terms of number of person [sic] per dolphin) and (e) Transportation of animals.

It is quite obvious that the thirty-nine (39) dolphins (including a three (3) months [sic] old calf born in captivity) kept at the facility are very well fed. Each animal is fed 2 kilograms of fish per meal four times a day or 8 kilograms per day per animal. The feed consist of at least

five (5) different species of fish and only whole fish are fed to the dolphins. The operator pays surrounding village fishermen about \$20,000.00 each month for feed.

Standard bottlenose dolphin feed portions in captivity are about 25 lbs per day. Eight kg amounts to about 18 lbs. In addition, in order to verify that “each dolphin” receives this amount every day, each dolphin must be individually identifiable and records must be meticulously kept on the amount of fish each is fed. The Solomon Islands authorities should produce and distribute these records, to reassure the public and other governments that each dolphin is receiving the required amount of food.

There have also been concerns expressed by NGOs and other governments about the methods used by village fishermen to acquire the fish they sell to the facility, which are reported to include using dynamite to collect reef fish. This ministers’ statement does not address these concerns.

When considering water flow and exchange, the facility (holding pens) is located at one of the best sites. Not only that, the facility is of a good size (large one approximately 110m long by 60m wide and a smaller one about a third of the size of the large one). The large holding area is subdivided into 6 different pens and to allow dolphins to have access to all parts of the holding area, including the deepest part (which is 9m at low tide), the pens are interconnected and dolphins are being trained to swim from one pen to the other. Bottlenose and spotted dolphins that are kept at the facility can tolerate shallow water. The large area covered by the facility means large volumes of water involved in flow and exchange which comes in from the nearby deep waters. No doubt, the holding pens receive good water flow and exchange during incoming and outgoing tides. Wave action at the site is quite minimal as it is relatively protected

One hundred and ten meters is roughly 360 ft. This is larger than a U.S. football field. The ministers should explain how the length of the enclosure was determined. In addition, if the enclosure is subdivided, the dolphins cannot actually swim 360 ft in a straight line. They must maneuver through gates every 60 feet (assuming the subdivisions are equal-sized). This is not ideal, especially in terms of the ability of the animals to get sufficient exercise. Also, while it is true that bottlenose dolphins can tolerate shallow water, spotted dolphins are in fact a deeper water species and rarely swim in very shallow water (they may seek sheltered, shallower bays when resting). In addition, bottlenose dolphins do not stay in extremely shallow water for prolonged periods, whereas the captive dolphins in this facility cannot move into deeper water, as it is not available within this enclosure.

Contamination by bacteria (E. coli) in amusement parks and aquariums is a problem that needs to be consistently monitored. This problem often arises in static pools where water circulation is poor. The build up of the bacteria is dangerous for animals and therefore the level of contamination has to be monitored regularly. The level of contamination at the Gavutu facility is monitored on a monthly basis and so far the results have been negative. A recommendation has been made to the operator to do weekly sampling for bacterial build up in the holding facility.

SIMMEC employs a total of 40 people, twenty-two (22) of whom work at the Gavutu facility and 18 in Honiara. This is a ratio of one person caring for two dolphins. Furthermore, two qualified Veterinarian [sic] doctors are engaged in the health care of these animals. These animals have far more Doctors per head compared to humans in Solomon Islands. Also, the

fact that majority of dolphins are now been [sic] hand-fed, is an indication that the level of care for the dolphins at the facility is satisfactory.

The final statement in this paragraph is without basis – the fact that dolphins will accept dead fish by hand is merely an indication that they are sufficiently hungry and have a strong survival instinct. It has no bearing on whether care is satisfactory or not (dolphins near death will continue to accept hand-feeding, sometimes until the hour of their death). In addition, the ministers should supply the curricula vitae of the veterinarians – it is possible that they are in fact small animal or livestock veterinarians, meaning that their qualifications to treat marine mammals are limited at best.

An area of great concern for any facility keeping marine mammals is that of transportation of animals from the points of capture to holding facility. The risk of animals receiving injuries is greater especially when capture area is far from the holding facility. At the moment, all the animals kept at the Gavutu facility are caught in the proximity of the facility. The operator does not encourage transporting dolphins over long distances (especially from other provinces) without proper training and equipment.

This statement actually suggests that a single stock of dolphins, inhabiting the waters near the Gavutu facility, is being targeted by these captures, rather than multiple stocks spread over a larger range. If the captures are concentrated on only a single stock (rather than spreading removals over several stocks), then depletion of that stock becomes more likely.

It is evident from the issues discussed above that the capture/hunting methods and husbandry of dolphins at the Gavutu facility is quite good. The animals are normal: feeding well, mating, very active and playful, giving birth in captivity and not showing any signs of stress. Although very active and playful at times, according to facility employees, animals do not fight each other. An animal born in captivity is now 3 months old. This would not have been so if animals are subjected to much stress and were not treated well at the facility.

Nothing in this ministers' statement describes the "capture/hunting methods," so the statement that these methods are "quite good" is without support. Also, the statement that because the calf that was born in captivity is still alive means that the animals are being treated well is without basis. Procreation is one of the strongest drives in the animal kingdom – while failure to breed in captivity is a strong sign of poor adaptation to captivity, successful reproduction does not necessarily mean good adaptation (in addition, this calf was borne by a female who was captured pregnant, which should have been prohibited – she did not become pregnant at the facility). The long-term survival of this calf and the production of others that survive would be a better indication of adaptation – the ministers are relying too heavily on an isolated and frankly irrelevant incident for their judgment.

Dophins [sic] in captivity

This is the first time a marine mammal is kept in captivity in Solomon Islands. As a new industry, the Department expects environmentalists, animal rights activists and other individuals to raise concerns especially with regard to the welfare of these animals. Let it be known to such environmentalists, activists and individuals that these concerns have been well addressed through regulatory means.

The authorities should supply the regulations to the public, media, and other governments, in order to allay their concerns. To our knowledge, no such regulations have been produced for public review.

Dolphins and other marine mammals have been held in Aquariums and Amusement Parks in other countries longer than Solomon Islands. The number held in captive [sic] in other countries are many times greater than what is held in captive [sic] at the Gavutu facility. Keeping dolphins in captivity (Aquariums and Amusement Parks) is not all negative but also has a lot of advantages. In the world today, about 50 million people (pers. Comm. Ted Hammond) visit Aquariums every year to watch and learn about dolphins and other marine mammals. In their natural environment, it is difficult for scientists to conduct proper research on these animals. By keeping these animals in Aquariums, the animals can be easily studied thus contributing not only to our understanding of the animal but also to our knowledge and advancement in other fields like medicine e.g. as in Dolphin Therapy etc.

This statement repeats standard public display industry propaganda, but is without empirical basis. Please refer to our web site's pages on marine mammals in captivity for counter-arguments to these claims about the benefits of captivity.

Concerned animal activists and environmentalists should realize that such an undertaking as that by the SIMMEC at Gavutu is a form of eco-attraction center, whereby tourists and center visitors, would have a chance to swim and play with Dolphins. This would enhance the strengthening of dolphin-man relationship, which we are all concerned about. In the long term therefore, even those coastal hunting communities would develop a new relationship with dolphins, one that is based on respect and compassion. The result would be the less slaughtering [sic] of dolphins by these communities and perhaps, a redirection of their dolphin utilization, towards the eco-attraction option.

This is an appealing argument, but has little empirical evidence to support it in countries where captive dolphin exhibits co-exist with hunting. Regardless, this "dolphin attraction" is apparently not open to the public anyway – in fact, individuals representing the media and animal protection groups have allegedly been beaten by guards at this facility merely for trying to videotape the dolphins. Clearly the local people are not being given the opportunity to learn from these animals, even if this argument were valid. These dolphins are not on public display but are being captured for foreign trade and commerce.

Already the SIMMEC is developing a database for the facility at Gavutu. All animals kept at the facility would be marked electronically for identification and monitoring purposes. Necropsy would be done on dead animals to ascertain cause of death. Various other information relating to the operation would be stored on this database and this would not only be useful for the sound operation of the Gavutu facility but also for the proper management of the dolphin resource in Solomon Islands.

The ministers' statement does not mention any dolphin mortalities. One dolphin has certainly died – it was killed by a crocodile. At least five others are reported to have died. If this is not true, then the authorities should issue a statement denying these deaths. If it is true, then they should describe what is known about the causes of death.

Other Issues

Mr. Christopher Porter, the operator of the Gavutu facility has never at any time been the mouthpiece of the Department of Fisheries and Marine Resources as implied by many. On the number of occasions that he came out in the media, what he did was simply to defend his position and company as a genuine investor but certainly not on behalf of the Department. It is quite unfortunate that the many criticisms leveled at this individual bears [sic] little merit and most, if not all, are narrow-focused considering the level of investment he has done in this country to date.

Conclusion

The Department of Fisheries has nothing to hide. We are open and would be most willing to answer any questions directed to us. Unfortunately some people, especially the NGOs and the so called environmentalists, have without seeking to understanding [sic] the real situation, went to the media and started blowing out their trumpets to the outside world with unsubstantiated information.

Many environmental and animal protection groups directed their initial inquiries to the Solomon Islands government. The HSUS, for example, sent a letter on July 17, addressed directly to the relevant Solomon Islands ministers (and others) – we never received a reply. This ministers' statement is in fact the first communication from the Solomon Islands government outside of the media that we have seen.

Solomon Islands advocates sustainable utilisation of natural resources. That is, where a resource is proven to be in a healthy state, the resource may be allowed to be harvested by the people for their benefit. Likewise, where a resource has been proven to face an over-exploitation risk, then appropriate measures must be taken to make sure that the resource is protected. You may have realized that recently the Department has gone tough [sic] in enforcing its laws relating to the harvest of marine resources. As a Department responsible for to the people of Solomon Islands, it must ensure that whilst healthy resources are allowed to be harvested, they are also protected from over-exploitation.

Additionally Solomon Islands also attaches great importance to fisheries, that have traditional values, such as the porpoise/dolphin fishery. In this respect, the Solomon Islands has been a member of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) to ensure that cetacean resources, especially the porpoises/dolphin, of the country are sustainably utilised for the benefit of the people. By the way, small cetaceans which include dolphins are not classified under the IWC.

This failure to include cetaceans under the IWC regulatory framework is in fact a point of serious contention within the IWC. Without the protection of such a multi-lateral agreement, the unsustainable utilization of small cetaceans (such as evidenced here by the captures and hunting of dolphins in the Solomon Islands) is far more likely to occur.

As long as there is scientific proof, (and perhaps traditional proof) that cetacean resources are under utilised, the Solomon Islands will continue to support the utilization of such resources for the benefit of the people of the country.

The ministers' statement admits that there is no scientific proof that cetacean resources are under-utilized in the Solomon Islands.

1. Mr. Ted Hammond is a consultant and expert on cetaceans. He has more than 30 years experience with cetaceans and was a member of the team that visited the Gavutu facility recently.

Mr. Ted Hammond is closely associated with the captive display industry in the United States and elsewhere. He should not be considered an independent observer.

2. Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission

3. Southwest Fisheries Science Center

Hon. NELSON KILE
Minister of Fisheries
Marine Resources

AND

ALBERT WATAh [sic]
Permanent Secretary of Fisheries &
Marine Resources

SOLOMON ISLANDS