

Should Zoos and Aquariums Exhibit Beluga Whales?

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In the wild, belugas, also known as white whales, are social animals. They swim in Arctic Ocean waters in groups called pods. Highly intelligent, the whales use different sounds to communicate and find their way. Belugas are also among the smallest kinds of whales.

More than 210 belugas, including 31 in the United States, live in aquariums and zoos around the world. The Georgia Aquarium has asked for permission to bring 18 more belugas into the U.S. The whales were captured off the coast of Russia. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is considering the aquarium's request. A law called the Marine Mammal Protection Act says the animals can only be brought into the country and put on display if they were captured without being hurt and there is an educational reason for doing so.

Georgia Aquarium officials say the 18 belugas will help people learn more about the species and allow scientists to better understand how to protect it. The aquarium would also breed the whales so U.S. aquariums can continue to display them. "When we can study and observe belugas in human care, we gain a better understanding of their biology and diseases that affect them, and learn how to aid populations in their natural habitats," says William Hurley, Georgia Aquarium's chief zoological officer. "Much of this research would be impossible to do in the remote locations and extreme climates where the animals live." The Georgia Aquarium would own the 18 belugas and would loan some to aquariums across the country.

Some scientists including Lori Marino, a beluga whale expert at Emory University, in Atlanta, Georgia, feel strongly that the whales belong in the ocean, not in tanks. These scientists say the whales are being used for entertainment and not for education, and having them in aquariums is not necessary for the species to survive. "Captive belugas, like other dolphins and whales, do not do well in tanks; they belong in the oceans," Marino told TFK. "Not only is it unfair to the belugas but there is no educational value in putting captive dolphins and whales on display. Students learn about dolphins and whales best when they see and read about them in their natural habitat."