

President Vladimir Putin
Russian Federation
23, Ulitsa Ilyinka,
103132, Moscow, Russia

15 March 2019

Dear President Putin:

As a group of marine mammal scientists with expertise in orcas and white whales, many of whom expressed concern specifically about the orca captures in previous correspondence with Russian authorities, we would like to address several issues surrounding the individual animals now held in very poor conditions in enclosures in Srednyaya Bay, Nakhodka. We hope these comments will be of help to you in your deliberations, in conjunction with the scientific community of Russia, in making decisions for these whales.

The Condition of These Whales Is Poor and Declining

We have attached a document (*Decline in Health of an Orca Held in Russian 'Whale Jail'*) recently prepared by biologists and veterinarians comparing an orca in photos taken 42 days apart, which documents that the health and wellbeing of this whale, and likely others, are deteriorating rapidly. Additionally, at least one orca and several white whales are reportedly missing and, although the captors claim these animals escaped the pens, given their young ages and their poor condition, we are concerned that they may actually have died.

Steps Should Be Taken Now to Improve the Health of These Animals and the Conditions of their Captivity

We urge you to provide access for a team of Russian and international experts to enter the facility to evaluate and treat the whales and start the process of improving the captive facility. Such improvements could include expanding the size of the pens to provide more room for the whales (especially the white whales, who seem unduly crowded), providing a way to warm the waters to prevent icing over of the pens (if icing is still a problem at the facility), and reducing the bacterial and other contaminants in the pens through, for example, better water circulation. The poor water quality is likely contributing to the apparent decline in the health of these animals, as evident from the poor state of their skin.

Plans Should be Made to Rehabilitate and Return the Whales to Where They Were Captured

We understand there has been some criticism regarding the idea of returning the whales to their capture sites (which are currently iced over). Given our knowledge of the social structures of these species, we believe it is very important to return these young animals to their birth populations. If this is done, the release effort, after appropriate rehabilitation, could be a success.

While they are being treated, arrangements for transport for the whales can be completed. In the meantime, the release sites in question should become free of ice, and the groups of whales from which these individuals were removed should have returned to the capture areas. These factors would all contribute toward higher likelihood of success.

We would be happy to consult with Russian specialists and your Government on plans to return these whales to their capture sites and release them.

We Repeat Our Hope that the Russia Government Will Prevent Future Captures of Orcas and White Whales in Russian Waters

As this incident has dramatically shown, free-ranging orcas and white whales are traumatically stressed by capture and face a high risk of mortality after capture. Captures also can have a significant impact on the conservation status of wild populations, and this could result in damage to Russia's precious natural resources.

Last November, many of us conveyed our concerns regarding these whales in our letter to Mr. A.L. Strelnikov of the Russian Federal Service for Overseeing Natural Resources in the Far Eastern Federal District, and we attach a copy of that letter here.

Thank you for the efforts of the Russian Government and scientists so far in working to resolve this problem. We appreciate those efforts and hope to assist in resolving this issue.

Sincerely,

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