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'Imprisoned' Killer Whales Spark Outcry in Moscow

By Alexey Eremenko

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Narnia the orca, shown here after her capture in the Far East in 2012, is now being kept in a tank in Moscow.

Russian police have refused to open a case into orca whales being held in Moscow in what animal rights campaigners say are cramped tanks that could leave the mammals deaf and insane.

Activists claim that killer whale cries have been heard for months at the VDNKh exhibition center in northern Moscow.

Last month, Moscow Deputy Mayor Marat Khusnullin was cited by Interfax as saying that the orcas, which are due to become the stars of the new VDNKh oceanarium, were being kept in the Far East pending the opening of the new facility.

But city police have confirmed the animals are being held in temporary facilities at the

exhibition center, according to a copy of a police statement published by hardline animal rights group Vita.

A 7-year-old, 2.5-ton female whale named Narnia and an unnamed 5-year-old, 1.5-ton male were flown to Moscow last December, two provincial media outlets said at the time. Police said the whales — the first orcas in captivity in Russia — were captured from poachers between mid-2012 and mid-2013 in the Sea of Okhotsk in Russia's Far East.

The new oceanarium, set to become Europe's biggest and the first in Russia to host orcas, was initially due to open in spring this year, but is still under construction and is now expected to open in 2015.

As a result, Narnia and her nameless companion have had to spend 10 months — and counting — at a temporary facility, Irina Novozhilova, head of Vita, told The Moscow Times on Sunday.

'Solitary Confinement'

The facility is closed to the public, but Novozhilova said, citing her group's investigation, that it is 65 meters long and contains two separate tanks for the orcas that she described as "solitary confinement cells."

The space is nowhere near enough for the orcas, which are known to cover up to 150 kilometers a day in the ocean, said Konstantin Zgurovsky, who supervises the marine program at WWF Russia.

"This is a huge stress that could make them dangerous," Zgurovsky said by telephone.

The concrete walls will also be interfering with the orcas' echolocation, which could leave the whales deaf, Novozhilova said.

The police report published by Vita said the animals were being kept in carefully maintained conditions, with filtered water, a diet consisting of 12 species of fish, and human access limited to experienced trainers and teams of vets.

The situation does not comprise animal abuse, a criminal offense punishable in Russia with up to two years in prison, the report said. It did not mention the alleged lack of space or threat to the animals' hearing.

VDNKh's administration has not publicly commented on the issue, and its representatives could not be reached for comment by e-mail or telephone Sunday.

Russia allows limited orca hunting, and captive whales can be kept at any kind of facility without a license.

No Abuse

The legal definition of animal abuse in Russia is very narrow: Only the intentional murder or maiming, committed out of hooliganism, with sadistic intent, in the presence of minors or for profit qualifies for criminal liability.

Environmental activists interviewed for this article conceded that the orcas' treatment at VDNKh did not necessarily constitute animal abuse under current legislation.

But they said it was still unethical, and highlighted the need for change.

"We need a law on the treatment of captive marine animals. Every civilized country has one, but Russia doesn't," said Olga Filatova of the Far East Russia Orca Project conservancy.

She added that while there is not enough data about the global population of orcas, some herds, including in Narnia's native Sea of Okhotsk, are estimated to be endangered.

The campaign to save the two whales at VDNKh is part of a global drive to spare sea mammals from captivity.

A handful of countries, including Brazil, Britain, Chile, India, Greece and Switzerland, as well as the U.S. states New York and South Carolina, have banned or severely curbed the use of cetaceans and other marine mammals in the entertainment industry in recent years.

The issue was thrust into the public spotlight by the release of the 2013 documentary "Blackfish" about an orca that killed three people during her time in captivity in one of the SeaWorld marine parks in the U.S.

The film said that killer whales — which, contrary to a popular misconception, do not kill humans in the wild — can be driven to live up to their name due to psychological trauma inflicted by a captive environment, which is radically different from the orca's natural habitat.

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