

Owner Denies Abusing Killer Whales in Moscow

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Orca whales at Sea World in San Diego, California put on a performance.

A scandal-mired company that owns two orcas in Moscow has waved away as "laughable" claims that the conditions in which the mammals are being kept could drive them deaf and insane.

The killer whales, flown to Moscow last December, are due to be housed in Europe's biggest oceanarium, set to open at the VDNKh exhibition center in northern Moscow.

The facility's opening was pushed back from this spring to 2015, which has forced the orcas to spend 10 months and counting in temporary quarters at VDNKh.

Animal rights activists have claimed the "jail-like" confinement in tanks is dangerous to the orcas' health.

But the whales' owner, Sochinsky Delfinary LLC (Sochi Dolphinarium), said even

the temporary pools in which the animals are being kept — 25 meters across and eight meters deep — were the best orca accommodation Russia had to offer.

In a statement by the company cited by VDNKh, it also dismissed claims that the concrete-walled pools could disrupt the cetaceans' echolocation.

VDNKh added in a separate statement that the orcas had to be flown to Moscow ahead of the oceanarium's opening before they grew too big to transport.

It also pledged to carry out a new assessment of the situation together with environmentalists at an unspecified time in the future.

The current management of Sochinsky Delfinary LLC was accused in 2009 of taking over the dolphinarium in Sochi through corporate raiding, government newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta said at the time.

But the management remained in charge of the facility despite court battles and outcry from the biologists who previously ran the dolphinarium.

Radical animals rights activists oppose holding marine mammals in captivity, saying it is impossible to recreate the conditions they need. But about 40 orcas remain in marine parks across the world.

The business appears to have good prospects in Russia, given that the only existing oceanarium in Moscow, in the city's northeast, recouped its \$18 million investment in less than three years, according to business weekly Kompaniya.

Real estate moguls God Nisanov and Zarakh Iliyev invested \$61 million in the oceanarium at VDNKh, Kompaniya said in June. The duo had not commented on the orcas story as of Monday evening.

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