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## Dolphin mania changes face of tourism in Caribbean

By Sally Kestin

Sun-Sentinel

Posted May 18 2004

CANCUN, MEXICO -- Dolphins are everywhere in this resort mecca. Here and throughout the state of Quintana Roo, more than 100 are kept in sea pens, concrete pools, even a shopping mall, for the amusement of tourists.

Eight new dolphin swim attractions have opened elsewhere in the Caribbean in the past two years with another eight proposed. Jamaica, Antigua, Anguilla, Curaçao, and Tortola have tapped into the lucrative business. Four facilities are proposed in the Cayman Islands alone.



"It's like a cancer," said Martha Watkins-Gilkes, an American living in Antigua who opposes the dolphin attractions. "It just keeps spreading."

Island governments, eager to increase tourism and add jobs, have approved them with cursory scrutiny, a South Florida Sun-Sentinel investigation found. A small group of primarily foreign businessmen and investors, including several Americans,

are behind the proliferation.

Donna Brewer Kassewitz of Miami founded Dolphin Discovery, a Mexican company with four Caribbean dolphin swim attractions, according to her Web site in November 2002. The site promotes Global Heart Inc., a nonprofit peace organization that sponsors sweat lodges and drumming circles in South Florida.

"Donna has also facilitated numerous spiritual retreats in the Yucatan, leading groups there to swim with dolphins and explore Mayan sacred sites," the Web site said. She has organized two international conferences on "dolphin-assisted therapy."

Kassewitz's ties to Dolphin Discovery have been removed from her Web site. Reached on her cell phone, she said she was busy but would call back with comments. She did not answer repeated messages after that.

Dolphin Discovery stocked its swim attractions in part with more than 30 dolphins purchased from Cuba and is under investigation by the U.S. government for possible violations of the trade embargo prohibiting Americans from doing business with the communist government.

Eduardo Albor, CEO of Dolphin Discovery, declined to say whether Kassewitz or other Americans were still involved in the company.

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"There has not been violations of the embargo, and no Americans have bought dolphins from Cuba for Dolphin Discovery," he said. "I'm 100 percent convinced I can prove that."

Graham Simpson, a Reno internist who helped found the American Holistic Medical Association, got into the dolphin business about five years ago. Simpson's Dolphin Fantaseas opened in Anguilla and Antigua and the company planned to expand to St. Lucia.

John J. Mezzanotte, an accountant in Connecticut, invested because, he said, "I thought it was an interesting opportunity. I know nothing about dolphins."

The Antiguan government gave Mezzanotte a permit for Dolphin Fantaseas to capture up to 12 dolphins a year and import and export them "as may be required," records show. The permit came with no public input and in violation of an international treaty, according to a lawsuit environmentalists on the island filed last fall.

Before the case went to trial, the Antiguan cabinet withdrew the permit.

"It's quite a big victory," said John Fuller, the environmentalists' lawyer. "Dolphins were going to be captured in our waters and sold without any kind of study about whether it would be detrimental to the population [in the wild]."

Dolphin Fantaseas bought six dolphins from Cuba and also is under investigation by the U.S. government.

Simpson did not respond to repeated messages seeking comment.

Dolphins Plus of Key Largo sent four dolphins to swim with guests at a resort in Tortola, British Virgin Islands in 2001. The water quality was so bad trainers canceled swim sessions, according to an account company officials later gave the federal government to explain why they abruptly moved the dolphins. The dispute with Prospect Reef Resort escalated to the point where police were involved and Dolphins Plus ended up flying the animals in October 2002 to Dominica, where the company is building a dolphin attraction. Less than a month later, dolphin Isla died.

"Isla had been sick on and off for eight years," Rick Borguss, an owner of Dolphins Plus told the Sun-Sentinel. "The water quality [at Tortola], and I think the transport was the final [straw]. You live and learn."

Cyril Romney, chairman of the Prospect Reef Resort board, disputed Dolphins Plus' account but declined to comment further.

Dolphins Plus takes credit for starting the swim-with-the-dolphins craze in 1984.

"Sadly, a good idea sometimes gets into what I call the greedy factor," Borguss said. "Look at what's happened in the Caribbean. Some of these places have like eight dolphins and they run 450 people a day through ... If they lose a dolphin, who cares? They go to Cuba and buy another one. They're doing it purely as a business."

Solomon Islands government officials agreed to a business transaction last year when they gave Canadian Chris Porter permission to capture and sell up to 100 dolphins. A company headed by Porter wanted to build a resort in the civil-war-torn South Pacific chain with proceeds from the dolphin sales, said American Mike Schultz, a former dolphin trainer in Florida and a consultant on the project.

Porter and Schultz "wanted to sell to anybody," said Adan Zurbia, head of Via Delphi, a Mexican company with dolphin attractions. "They wanted to charge \$20,000 for each dolphin."

Zurbia said he declined. Three weeks later, a contact in Japan offered the

Solomon Islands dolphins for \$40,000 each, he said.

Parque Nizuc, a swim attraction in Cancun on the grounds of a Wet & Wild, bought 28 of the dolphins. A chartered DC-10 flew them to the park last July.

Activists decried the Solomon Islands capture, but have been ineffective in slowing the Caribbean dolphin business.

In the past decade, the Mexican government granted permits for dolphin attractions in an amusement park next to a roller coaster, under a bungee jump and in a mall.

At La Isla Shopping Village on Cancun's main strip, shoppers can eat at Johnny Rockets diner, try on clothes in a T-Shirts Factory and pay to see dolphins in a concrete pool in the mall.

Cars and buses whiz by just beyond their tank. Visitors pay \$12 to watch the dolphins, obtained from Cuba, or \$115 for a 45-minute swim.

Government officials like dolphin businesses because they bring new jobs and tourist dollars.

"Foreigners come in and take advantage of these islands by exploiting our natural resources," said Watkins-Gilkes, a native of Mississippi who has lived in Antigua for 20 years. "It seems to me the only people benefiting are the owners of the facility."

The Jamaican government allowed Dolphin Cove to expand an Ocho Rios attraction last year despite opposition from environmentalists.

"At the public meetings here, there was a fair amount of concern for dolphins," said Diana McCaulay, head of the Jamaica Environment Trust. "But there were also a fair amount of people saying jobs, jobs, jobs."

The opponents brought in American scientists against keeping marine mammals in captivity.

"What is it that these people in the U.S. have to come here and bug us?" said Stafford Burrowes, co-owner of Dolphin Cove. "You have more than 100 facilities. They need to check their own situation at home."

Cruise ships from the United States provide a never-ending stream of customers. Many dolphin attractions have docks or ferry service to shuttle passengers directly from ship to dolphins.

"The one thing you don't want to miss. Take advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get up close and personal with a dolphin," says Royal Caribbean International's Web site on shore excursions in Nassau. "Have your picture taken while kissing these loving creatures."

The cruise lines get a cut from the dolphin bookings, though they won't say how much.

"That's not usually something we would disclose," said Jaye Hilton, spokeswoman for Royal Caribbean. "We do realize some profits from the shore excursions."

Dolphins have become the top-draw at destinations such as Cancun, despite competition from boating, diving, fishing and some of the world's most beautiful beaches.

A Cancun tourist magazine is filled with ads offering swimming, wading and watching dolphins, "starting at only \$39 dollars."

"When our own dolphin friend finally agreed to meet with us, she allowed us to hold her in our arms," reads one testimonial in the magazine. "We could just imagine her preventing little balserito Elián Gonzalez from

drowning in the shark-infested waters of the Florida Keys."

"All propaganda for tourists has to do with dolphins," said Vincente Vega, who books tourist excursions in Cancun. "They're everywhere. It's the most popular attraction."

During a recent visit to Manati Park in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, tourists paid \$70 for 10 minutes with a dolphin. Eight at a time, they took turns petting three dolphins, riding across the pool on their dorsal fins and posing for pictures, one dolphin at each shoulder.

In under an hour, the dolphins swam with 32 tourists.

One of them, Michelle Gray, a honeymooner from Warren, Pa., said that she would not have done it had she known beforehand that the dolphins came from the wild in Cuba.

She remembered that, "They told us the dolphins loved to be petted, but it sure didn't seem like it. They'd dart to the bottom or back to the trainer."

Manati Park was building a new tank and adding more dolphins, said sales manager Imar Alvarez. Ocean World on the island's northern coast bought land near Punta Cana and was considering a competing attraction.

Attorney Fuller says that in Third World countries with little else to lure tourists, swim attractions are "a good bet." He sees plenty of opportunity still in the Caribbean dolphin business.

"There's too much money involved," he said.

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