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## COMMENTARY

# Dolphin Quest provides highest animal care

By Robin Ganzert

**D**olphin Quest, one of Hawaii's most beloved attractions, recently achieved certification for animal welfare from the American Humane Conservation program, assuring visitors that the animals living there receive the highest level of humane care.

Dolphin Quest — which operates locations on the Big Island and Oahu, as well as Bermuda — opened in 1988 as a place where people and dolphins could share the wonder of close interactions.

It has since continually evolved to meet the changing demands of the modern world. People today no longer laud an institution for simply providing an interactive animal experience; in-

stead, the public expects facilities to serve as modern ark of hope for species living both under their care and in the wild. Dolphin Quest embodies these values.

Visitors to the Hawaii locations may see a dolphin tossing a basketball high into the air or participating in games with a trainer, such as matching similar shapes to one another. Species-specific enrichment behaviors like these provide much-needed mental and physical stimulation while allowing trainers to affectionately interact with each animal. Caregivers at Dolphin Quest are also dedicated to attentive, adaptive animal care: when daily health assessments revealed that one of their oldest dolphins was losing her eyesight, trainers modified their

communication processes, teaching the dolphin to recognize hand signals by touch or underwater.

The American Humane Conservation program was launched last year by American Humane, the country's first national humane organization and largest certifier of animal welfare. The organization worked with an independent scientific advisory committee comprised of world-renowned leaders in the fields of animal science, behavior, ethics and conservation to develop the evidence-based program standards — which now serve as a benchmark of humane care to which institutions can aspire.

To earn certification, all three Dolphin Quest locations passed a thorough audit of their facilities and

practices. The evaluation verified many dimensions of animal welfare, including excellent animal health and housing; positive social interactions within groups of animals, as well as between animals and handlers; and safe and stimulating living environments.

Dolphin Quest's commitment to upholding these high standards of verifiable animal care improves the lives of the animals living there, which include an impressive array of bottlenose dolphins, blacktip reef sharks and green sea turtles. But the institution is also championing vital efforts to protect all of the planet's precious species. Since opening, it has taught countless public education programs and contributed more than \$3 million in funding to

conservation and research efforts.

Consider the facility's Head Start Program, which raises newly hatched endangered sea turtles before releasing them back into the wild — part of a conservation effort to protect the vanishing species. In April 2016, Dolphin Quest Oahu released its latest pair of rehabilitated green sea turtles to help rebuild the local turtle population, which has suffered since the 1970s, when demand for turtle meat and shell products took a toll on the species.

But even when animals are never reintroduced to the wild, placing them under human care in a responsible institution can improve the lives of their wild counterparts. For example, milk samples that the facility's

veterinarians collect from nursing dolphins are used as baseline data for comparisons with dolphins living in the wild. This valuable knowledge informs research projects, including a current study testing harmful pollutants found in wild dolphin ecosystems.

While most already know the excitement that a splash-filled visit to Dolphin Quest provides, visitors can now experience it with the peace-of-mind that comes from knowing that the animals living there receive the highest levels of humane, verifiable and transparent animal care.

*Robin Ganzert is president and CEO of American Humane, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that works to ensure the safety and well-being of animals.*