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# Langkawi dolphin pens 'appalling'

*By Sandra Davie*

**Acres says enclosures didn't meet standards; RWS rebuts allegations**

THE dolphins, slated to be an attraction at an oceanarium in Resorts World Sentosa, continue to draw debate.

After going to Langkawi to inspect four sea pens where the bottlenose dolphins had been kept for a year before they were relocated to the Philippines, local animal protection group Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) has said it is 'appalled' at what it discovered.

Two of the nine marine mammals died last October while the remaining seven were recently sent to a facility in Subic Bay in the Philippines, which houses another 18 of the RWS dolphins.

The 8ha oceanarium, called Marine Life Park (MLP), was among the draws touted by RWS, owned by Genting Singapore, when it made its bid to run an integrated resort here.

Acres executive director Louis Ng and another staff member visited Langkawi from Sunday to Tuesday. 'The dolphins were housed in rusty enclosures measuring approximately 10m by 10m,' he said. 'If you go by the standards set by the European Association for Aquatic Animals which AVA (the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority) goes by, this is clearly insufficient to meet the needs of these wild-caught dolphins.'

He added that the pens, just off the coast where the Genting group has a hotel called Awana Porto Malai, is in an area frequented by boats.

'Sounds of mechanical origin are probably the most stressful for the dolphins because of their regular repetitive nature,' Mr Ng said, claiming that RWS did not employ a full-time vet to care for them or have an animal hospital.

The female dolphins - one aged between four and five years, and the other around 10 - died from an acute bacterial infection arising from contact with contaminated soil and surface waters.

Mr Ng also asked why the dolphins were not sent to the Philippines from the start. Citing studies, he said: 'Each time they are confined and shipped from one place to another, it is as traumatic as if they were being newly captured from the wild.'

Contacted by The Straits Times, RWS spokesman Krist Boo said the allegations against the MLP were 'cursory' or 'inaccurate in parts'.

Noting that Acres visited the Langkawi facility nearly a month after it had closed, she said the enclosures were more than double the size of what Acres had indicated, and met global standards. She added that there was a full-time vet and two consulting vets.

'Acres chose, in pictures it used for campaigning, to highlight rust on the side of a boardwalk next to the enclosures. This picture is not reflective of the facility when it was in operation.

'Acres, with its own experience and challenges in setting up an animal shelter, should be familiar with how swiftly unpopulated outdoor facilities deteriorate. This is especially so at sea.'

She added that round-the-clock security had been provided to prevent boats from coming too near the enclosures.

Ms Boo explained that the relocation to the Philippines had been part of a plan to expand the 'development of our dolphins and trainers'.

'The MLP team will also start preparations to commence our long-term goal of developing a breeding programme for the dolphins,' she said, adding that all are in good health.

While animal activists here have been up in arms over the captivity of dolphins, RWS has stressed that the oceanarium - the world's largest aquarium - was 'part of the bid' when it won the IR licence in 2006.

The Singapore Tourism Board had stressed recently that RWS must comply with global regulations, including the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites), and the requirements of the AVA, to safeguard animal health.

Bottlenose dolphins are listed in Appendix II of Cites which entails strict regulations in their trade. The RWS had said previously it would comply with these regulations.