

*"Protect the
Ocean and You
Protect Yourself."*



June 20, 2011

To the Free Morgan Group,

I, in association with my not-for-profit organization, **Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ocean Futures Society** and our organizations Marine Biologist and Field Producer, Holly Lohuis, am delighted to accept the invitation of your members to join the Expert Board of the Free Morgan Group.

I have been following the case of the young orca, Morgan, with particular interest as in the past we have had close contact with two individual orca and been involved with their rescue, rehabilitation and release. The first involved an orca known as 'Keiko' (who was the star of the popular movie Free Willy). I know all your members will be familiar with his history and the incredible boundaries this animals' rehabilitation and release broke. For four and one-half years, I was directly involved with the release of Keiko. Public outrage at his continued captivity and poor health resulted in a movement to rehabilitate and free him. Millions of dollars in private donations made that possible, in an unprecedented experiment with scientists, animal husbandry experts and my team and others.

Like many of the orcas now in captivity, Keiko was captured at a young age. The belief was that if we could identify and find his natal pod, we could release him and he would be accepted back into the wild in the company of other orcas. That never happened. After years of training, at great expense, Keiko was finally able to catch and eat live fish and was returned to the waters in Iceland near where he was captured. He never integrated with the wild whales he encountered. He often swam back to the boat for protection and waited at the gate of his enclosure to be let back in. Keiko finally left his constant human caregivers and swam over 1,000 miles, feeding himself, from Iceland to Norway, where he entered a fjord and stayed, dependent again on human attention, until his death by a pneumonia-like disease.

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Despite the unfortunate and untimely death of Keiko, the project could be considered a success on so many levels. Not only did Keiko, who had been in captivity for nearly two decades, once again experience the feel of the open ocean on his sensitive skin, he experienced the excitement of surfing down waves, the satisfaction of catching his own food and the freedom to decide where and when to swim. All these aspects which wild orca experience, as a natural part of their lives, had been withheld from Keiko, in the same way as they are now being withheld from Morgan.

Until recently, I had no reason to believe that other orcas who have spent their lives in captivity could be successfully reintroduced to their pod or to a wild oceanic environment, even if the vast funds necessary were available to rehabilitate them for the wild.

I had been led to believe that only if we knew the location and pods from which individuals were captured, should we consider their release. However, now I realize that orca society is not always as structured as we first believed and that there is hope for individuals like Morgan, where the approximate location of her origin is known, even if her natal group cannot be identified by us mere humans.

The seed for this new paradigm was planted in my mind whilst working with Dr. Ingrid Visser and her Orca Research Trust, based in New Zealand. We were filming for the PBS documentary "Call of the Killer Whale" and were able to assist with the rescue, rehabilitation and release of a young orca who was named (during the rescue), by Dr. Visser, as 'Rakey-Cousteau'. The name arose due to the specific rake marks on her body and in honor of the Cousteau legacy of conservation of the Marine Environment.

Rakey-Cousteau was found on a beach with pounding waves and howling winds which made repatriation into the area where she had been discovered physically impossible and dangerous to her and the personnel involved.

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The decision was made by the New Zealand Government, in consultation with Dr. Visser, to move her to an area where the water conditions were calm and which were on the other coast of New Zealand. Although to date Rakey-Cousteau has yet to be resighted, Dr. Visser is confident that she will be, given the success in the past of rescuing 12 orca from separate strandings on the New Zealand coastline.

Since the Free Morgan group first contacted me, I have taken the time to read the Free Morgan Release Plan and the comprehensive report prepared by Hardie & Visser, regarding the situation Morgan is currently being subjected to in the entertainment park in the Netherlands. Within that document (page 38) I read with interest that it is possible for orcas to have a "fluid fission-fusion" society. Dr. Visser has also drawn my attention to the fact that 'adoption' and/or provisioning of a young orca, or at the very least, non-aggressive interaction and tolerance, has been observed in the population of orca off Norway, where Morgan is thought to originate from. These examples illustrate clearly that we still have a lot to learn about this incredible marine species and that at the very least an attempt should be made to return Morgan to her native waters and give her the chance to find her family.

Every effort should be made to firstly move Morgan out of the concrete tank she has been imprisoned in. She should immediately be moved to a facility where rehabilitation can begin, similar to the way in which Keiko was rehabilitated. The lessons we learned with Keiko can be applied to Morgan to give her an even greater chance of success.

Once Morgan has begun the rehabilitation process it would be logical that a safe enclosure for her could be installed in the area where orcas have been observed this summer off Norway. Once there, Morgan and the wild orcas could communicate acoustically and their reactions be monitored. Given the comments posted by our Ocean Futures Society members, I think there would be tremendous public support for a humane, experimental program like this which would give Morgan a chance at freedom.

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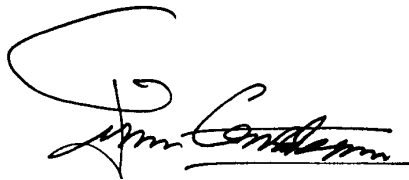
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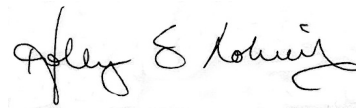
Having worked with Dr. Visser in New Zealand, I am aware of her dedication to these magnificent animals. After having read the report she has prepared on the confinement of Morgan in the Netherlands and the extremely deprived conditions Morgan is being subjected to, I find it distressing to think that people can continue to treat animals in such a way.

Furthermore I find it hard to imagine that it could even be considered to export Morgan to a facility which imprisons other orca, no matter the number of orca, the size of the facility or the apparent justifications for such a move, when clearly the best option for Morgan is release back into the wild through a well managed plan such as that prepared by the Free Morgan Expert Board.

Sincerely,



Jean-Michel Cousteau
President



Holly S. Lohuis
Marine Biologist, Field Producer

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