

Letter to the Editor

Marine Mammal Experts. Let's Share Your Stories! An Open Letter Reflecting on the 52nd Annual Symposium of the European Association for Aquatic Mammals

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Dear *Aquatic Mammals* Editor and the Scientific Community:

For decades, experts in the field of aquatic mammals have tirelessly contributed to our understanding of the lives of these animals. From pinnipeds to cetaceans and sirenians, research has not only deepened our knowledge but has also played a pivotal role in global conservation initiatives. Along the way, generations of scientists, veterinarians, technicians, animal trainers, and educators have experienced intense emotions and gathered unique, epic stories about these fascinating animals.

The recent 52nd Annual Symposium organized by the European Association for Aquatic Mammals (EAAM), held from 13-15 March 2024 at Loro Parque (Tenerife, Spain), was once again the ideal venue where such scientific tales were shared and discussed, sparking new interests and inspiring the gathered enthusiasts of aquatic mammals.

The symposium provided a unique platform for specialists from various disciplines to convene and exchange their latest discoveries, successes, and challenges. The diversity of perspectives, from trainers and educators to scientists and conservationists, fostered an environment of collaboration and innovation.

The official opening ceremony, led by our host Mr. Kiesling, CEO of Loro Parque, highlighted Loro Parque's dedication to research and conservation, reflected in their commitment to create a large, protected area for Atlantic marine mammals in Macaronesia. This opening ushered in a series of captivating presentations and discussions. The first keynote speaker of our symposium, Dr. Heidi Lyn, captivated the audience with insights into bottlenose dolphins' behavior, enrichment, cognition, and communication, emphasizing the value of studying the animal as a whole. Throughout the day, sessions delved into veterinary care, acoustic studies, and

behavioral studies. From CT scans of dolphins to anesthesia techniques and pathological studies of killer whales, each presentation provided valuable insights into the health and well-being of aquatic mammals. The day concluded with a roundtable discussion on the Marine Mammal Research Network (MMRN), highlighting a new tool to foster collaborations between scientists and zoological facilities.

This year, the EAAM Conservation Committee organized its first "Conservation Evening," led by Dr. Lorenzo von Fersen, an inspiring event aimed at showcasing several field interventions in which the zoological community participated, such as in Brazil (Lago Tefe) to rescue endangered Amazon River dolphins threatened by an unprecedented drought. This highlighted a need to strengthen bridges between different stakeholders in zoos and in the field to improve responsiveness when it comes to rescue operations aimed at supporting endangered aquatic mammal populations. The Oceanographic team presented the training workshops they organized to educate multiple South American specialists in handling and first aid for distressed cetaceans. Dr. von Fersen gave a clear overview on how the One Plan Approach—integrating all knowledge at our disposal in animal science and care—is a solid framework to fuel powerful conservation actions, especially when it comes to aquatic mammals.

Day 2 commenced with a focus on animal welfare, chaired by esteemed experts. Dr. Elisabetta Palagi's keynote address emphasized the importance of play in both aquatic and terrestrial environments, sparking thoughtful discussions on welfare assessment frameworks and cognitive enrichments. Veterinary sessions explored neuroendocrine systems, endoscopic findings, and fungal infections in cetaceans, showcasing the latest advancements in medical care for marine mammals. The day culminated in sessions on training methodologies, highlighting innovative

approaches to behavioral learning and cognitive research. From creativity in dolphins to corneal debridement in sea lions, each presentation underscored the importance of positive reinforcement and shaping techniques in animal training.

Drs. Kathleen Dudzinski and Heather Manitzas Hill led a successful roundtable discussion on the peer-review publishing process, offering valuable recommendations to enhance participants' success in sharing their results and data with the scientific community.

The EAAM general assembly allowed for the presentation of a year-end report, highlighting a year filled with events, expressing gratitude to Dr. Renato Lenzi for his six-year tenure on the EAAM board, and welcoming our new President-Elect, Robert Gojceta. The EAAM members decided to adopt the "Safeguarding the Future of the Endangered Lahille's Bottlenose Dolphins in South America" as their official conservation campaign.

The final day of the symposium commenced with Dr. Renaud de Stephanis's enlightening presentation on 30 years of orca research in the Strait of Gibraltar, followed by discussions on habitat conservation and human-wildlife interactions and

conflict, as illustrated by several reports of killer whale attacks on boats. Technical and scientific sessions showcased cutting-edge technologies, from AI-based acoustic signal recognition systems to mechanical water disinfection methods, demonstrating the ongoing commitment to advancing research and care practices in marine mammal facilities. The symposium concluded with an official closure, followed by a visit to Loro Parque, providing attendees with a first-hand look at innovative conservation efforts and exemplary animal care practices.

In conclusion, the 52nd Annual Symposium of the EAAM, three days of intensive learning and exchange of ideas, was a resounding success thanks to the contributions of dedicated researchers, practitioners, and enthusiasts. We extend our sincere gratitude to the organizers, presenters, and attendees for their invaluable contributions to the advancement of marine mammal science and conservation.

Let us continue to collaborate and innovate, *in situ* and *ex situ*—in the field and in zoological facilities—as we strive towards a future where aquatic mammals thrive in harmony with their environments.



Most of the EAAM symposium attendees gather outside of Loro Parque before touring the zoo after the meeting. (Photo provided by the symposium organizers)