

Letter to the Editor

53rd EAAM Symposium: Aquatic Mammal Welfare *A Key to Conservation Success. Caring for Individuals, Protecting Species*

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Visiting an accredited zoological institution hosting aquatic mammals exposes you to an unexpected risk: you might bump into a trainer, veterinarian, or biologist; and, if you're lucky, you could start a conversation with them. Before you know it, you'll dive into a world of knowledge, fascinating anecdotes, expertise, and dedication. Soon, you'll realize that when it comes to sea lions, manatees, dolphins, and other air-breathing ocean creatures, you're speaking with real animal welfare specialists.

At its core, this expertise is not only about providing the best possible care for animals in zoological settings, it is also a crucial tool for enhancing conservation and animal rescue efforts. How can welfare science contribute to the survival of species? How do our growing insights into marine mammal behaviour, health, and cognition inform rehabilitation and conservation strategies? From 10 to 14 March, the European Association for Aquatic Mammals (EAAM) gathered at Zoo de Beauval in France to address these key questions during its 53rd annual symposium.

This year's symposium focused on the theme "Caring for Individuals, Protecting Species," reflecting the commitment of the zoological community to integrating welfare science into both the daily care of animals and the conservation of their wild counterparts. Over 100 participants from numerous countries attended, representing diverse backgrounds in marine mammal science and management.

Advances in veterinary medicine and welfare assessments, behavioural research and cognitive studies in marine mammals, conservation strategies and rehabilitation efforts for stranded and at-risk species, innovative training techniques and their implications for welfare, and the role of zoological institutions in supporting wild populations through research and education were presented and discussed during four intense days.

Keynote speakers Dr. Jake Veasey shared his forward-thinking approach to terrestrial animal welfare, offering valuable insights for aquatic mammal

specialists; Dr. Christophe Guinet, who has spent over 25 years studying killer whales in the Crozet Archipelago, discussed how fisheries are forcing these animals to adapt, leaving them with fewer survival strategies; and naturalist Debbie Bouma demonstrated how knowledge gained in zoological settings can guide ecotourism towards respectful practices and help assess the well-being of wild animals in their natural environment.

A special session was dedicated to the profound challenges facing marine mammal professionals as the very model of hosting cetaceans in zoological settings is undergoing a crisis. This shift demands a response driven by expertise, innovation, and a willingness to rethink traditional approaches. While societal and legislative landscapes continue to evolve, one fact remains unchanged: with 25% of marine mammal species facing extinction, zoological institutions are more essential than ever. Discussions highlighted the need for disruptive solutions that ensure the highest welfare standards while reinforcing the indispensable role of zoos and aquariums in research, education, and conservation. Evidence-based strategies remain crucial—not only for optimizing animal care but also for countering misinformation that threatens to undermine effective conservation efforts.

Recognizing the importance of bridging *ex-situ* and *in-situ* research, the EAAM proudly introduced its Annual Student Research Grant during this symposium. This initiative aims to enhance the scientific relevance of PhD projects by fostering collaborations between field researchers and zoological institutions, ensuring that conservation efforts benefit from the latest advancements in animal welfare science.

Beyond the academic program, attendees engaged in networking events, workshops, and collaborative initiatives aimed at strengthening international cooperation and advancing the field.

As the EAAM continues its mission to promote the highest standards of marine mammal care and research, this symposium reaffirmed the

importance of collaboration between scientists, veterinarians, trainers, and conservationists in addressing the complex challenges facing these species today.

We extend our gratitude to our hosts, speakers, and participants for their contributions to another successful gathering and look forward to the 54th EAAM Symposium next year.

