

Dolphin therapy is booming despite concerns about efficacy and animal cruelty

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Do you or does your child suffer from cerebral palsy? Down syndrome? Autism? A knee injury? General ennui?

If you do -- and you have a week or two and a few thousand dollars to spare -- a growing and controversial group of global entrepreneurs claims it can help you feel better by putting you in close contact with dolphins.

The strategy is known as dolphin-assisted therapy, and the basic idea is that even brief exposure to these charismatic creatures -- swimming around with them, petting and kissing them, watching them do tricks and hearing their clicking calls in tanks, lagoons or the open ocean -- is so uniquely rewarding that it produces benefits all by itself and/or jump-starts a patient's receptiveness to more-conventional therapy.

Emory University neuroscientist Lori Marino, who has spent more than a decade tracking the trend, estimates there are now more than 100 organizations offering therapy with dolphins. They're found in such widely scattered places as Florida, Hawaii, Mexico, Israel, Australia and Ukraine, and a study cited in 2007 by the international [Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society](#) said a typical charge was \$2,600 for five 40-minute sessions.

Their approaches vary widely: At one end are relatively conservative nonprofits such as [Island Dolphin Care](#), which operates programs for "special needs" children out of a \$2 million facility in the Florida Keys; its Web site acknowledges that "there is no scientific proof that [dolphins] heal nor is there proof that they do not heal" and attributes most children's progress to being in "an environment that is highly motivating."

At the other end are more imaginative operations, such as the [Dolphin Connection](#), based in the small Hawaiian town of Kealahou, where Joan Ocean, described on her Web site as a "psychologist, shaman, and authority on the subject of Dolphin Tel-Empathic Communication," charges \$1,995 for week-long swim-with-dolphin programs offering "cellular communication and healing" and "intergalactic journeying."

The dolphin-therapy business has been booming, fueled in part by the rapid growth in diagnoses of childhood mental disorders such as autism. Desperate parents in search of cures have flown to the facilities, as if to a seaside Lourdes, when all else has failed.

The practice, however, is fiercely criticized by researchers and marine mammal conservationists, including the educational anthropologist widely credited with having invented it, retired Florida

International University researcher Betsy Smith. These critics charge that it is no more effective and considerably more expensive than skillful conventional treatment, while potentially harmful to the humans and the animals.

Smith, who was originally inspired by watching a dolphin interact with her mentally disabled brother in the 1970s, offered the therapy free of charge for more than a decade, before abandoning the work out of ethical concerns in the 1990s. She now maintains that dolphin therapy boils down to "the exploitation of vulnerable people and vulnerable dolphins."

"When I started this whole thing, I had no idea what we were unleashing," she said in a telephone interview.

Even Ric O'Barry, who won fame in the 1960s as the trainer of TV's Flipper, has since become what he describes as a "dolphin abolitionist," opposed to all forms of dolphin captivity and domination, and leading efforts to end dolphin hunting and return captive specimens to the wild.

"It's a fascinating paradox," said Marino, who along with two colleagues described concerns about dolphins in a presentation they made in San Diego Sunday at the American Association for the Advancement of Science convention. "People are wacky about dolphins, and yet they're becoming the most abused of animals."

Dolphin therapy is not regulated by any U.S. government authority overseeing health and safety standards for either humans or dolphins.

The Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society has urged that the therapy be abandoned, citing reports of serious injuries to people who swim with dolphins, including bites and broken ribs, and the potential for disease transmission and stress for captive dolphins that are obliged to interact with a continuous stream of strangers and may be scratched by fingernails and jewelry.

Dueling researchers

Marino has published reviews of the scientific literature that rigorously dispute claims of any unique therapeutic benefit from contact with dolphins. Even so, the Autism Society, the nation's leading grass-roots advocacy group for the illness, describes dolphin therapy on its Web site, without caveats, as one of several treatment approaches that "can help by increasing communication skills, developing social interaction, and providing a sense of accomplishment."

The Autism Society's Web site notes the research of retired Florida International University psychologist David Nathanson, who, it says, "in a number of studies . . . found that children with disabilities learned faster and retained information longer when they were with dolphins, compared to children who learned in a classroom setting."

Nathanson, an ebullient entrepreneur, has been selling dolphin-assisted therapy for more than 20 years. His Web site describes him as head of Dolphin Human Therapy, "an international consulting company . . . dedicated to helping you establish, on site at your facility, the highest

quality professional rehabilitation program for children (and some adults) with disabilities, depression or other special needs." He promises prospective clients that DHT can help them "significantly increase revenue" and "receive positive, international media attention" while helping children and families. In an interview and subsequent e-mails, Nathanson said he is planning to open a major new dolphin therapy center in the Cayman Islands this summer.

In 1997, Nathanson published research in the journal *Anthrozoos*, based on his findings from working with children with disabilities including Down syndrome, autism and brain damage. He concluded that two weeks of "dolphin human therapy" could achieve "significantly greater improvement and more cost effective treatment results" than six months of conventional physical or speech therapy.

Marino, however, has singled out Nathanson's research as "thoroughly unconvincing" and methodologically flawed, lacking adequate control groups and suffering from researcher bias. She and other researchers question whether any benefits noted are directly attributable to the dolphins, apart from the stimulation that a disabled child might experience from being brought to an exciting new place with his parents, showered with attention and taken swimming.

"He uses the dolphins like M&Ms," says Smith. "These are vulnerable, vulnerable families. They take the child to see the dolphins, and it's one of the few times the family is together, and the child is getting all this attention, and it becomes wonderful to them, while someone is ka'chinging a cash register in the background."

In an interview, Nathanson defended his studies and his business enterprise, adding, "Anyone can be a big shot, and sit back and talk. It's another thing to hold a child in your arms." His critics, including Marino, he charged, are motivated mainly by their opposition to keeping dolphins captive, which he branded "a philosophical argument."

"Who says being in the wild is a bed of roses?" Nathanson demanded. "What about oil spills? I live in something called the real world, capisce?"

'This is the only place'

Dolphins have fascinated humans since ancient times with their extraordinary grace and intelligence, and those seemingly frozen smiles. Some dolphin-therapy advocates attribute special powers to their sonar, which they use to scan the water around them. (Nathanson, who acknowledged there was "no hard evidence" of therapeutic benefits from sonar, said he was nonetheless "perfectly willing to be open to possibilities that use of sonar has effects on well-being and even breaking down tumors.")

On Hawaii's Big Island, Star (formerly Paradise) Newland says swimming with a dolphin healed her chronic knee pain. She has since co-founded the [Sirius Institute](#), which promotes the "dolphinization of the planet" and has plans for a program whereby women can give birth in the ocean, surrounded by the charismatic creatures. "The idea is to have a group of dolphins and

humans born together and living together for a period of time," says Newland's collaborator, Michael Hyson.

More-conventional testimonials abound from parents who say contact with dolphins helped their children when other treatments failed.

Sharon Cox, a retired pharmacist from Oklahoma, says her daughter Jacklyn, who had a diagnosis of autism and pervasive developmental delay, had yet to say a word at age 6, when she first brought her to Island Dolphin Care in Key Largo.

"I'd been told by doctors and educators that she was pretty much a lost cause," Cox said. Yet after just three days with the dolphins, combined with what she described as extraordinarily skillful attention from the center's therapists, Cox said, her daughter said her first word. She has since returned with Jacklyn every year for the past 12 years and recently moved to Florida to be closer to the dolphins. At 18, Jacklyn still has only a limited vocabulary, Cox said. "Each time we came, she'd gain six to 12 months' worth of development in two weeks, but then she'd come home and there'd be no follow-up," she said. "This is the only place where she gets what she needs."

Cox disagreed with conservationists who charge that dolphins are being mistreated. "Hundreds and hundreds of people come through here just to swim and interact with them one-on-one, and they love the interaction," she said. "They're like a dog. They're very social. They love greeting people."

Granted, humans generally treat dolphins much better than animals such as cattle. A major difference, say dolphin advocates, is our determined belief that dolphins enjoy interacting with people. As Flipper's old trainer, O'Barry, has pointed out, captive dolphins perform their antics (including therapy) in return for fish -- i.e., to survive. He calls the dolphin's smile "nature's greatest deception."

Jayne LeFors, a resource management specialist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Hawaii, agreed that people commonly misinterpret dolphins' behavior to the dolphins' detriment.

For instance, the dolphins that frequent Kealakekua Bay, where Joan Ocean runs her business, use the shallow waters, where predators are easy to spot, to sleep and nurse their young. Approaching them there is like entering their bedroom, she said, and when they leap in the air while being pursued by swimmers or kayakers, they may be expressing annoyance rather than playfulness. Or they may be genuinely playful and curious to their own detriment, like children staying up to watch videos after bedtime. "They don't necessarily know what's good for them," said LeFors.

As concern has grown about mistreatment of dolphins captured for therapy, some people have been seeking substitutes.

A Southern California outfit called Virtual Dolphin Therapy offers clients the experience of lying on water-filled mattresses and watching images of swimming dolphins on an overhead screen. Nathanson, in Florida, has been experimenting with a dolphinlike robot. In research published in 2007, he concluded that interaction with the robot "provided the same or more therapeutic benefits as interaction with dolphins, without the environmental, administrative/legal and practical limitations, including high cost associated with dolphins."

Even so, Nathanson said, his new facility in the Cayman Islands will be using live dolphins.