



For Immediate Release

Media Contact: Margaux Dodds, margaux@marineconnection.org

+44 (0) 75 88 681 247

NOAA Imposes Strong Restrictions on Aquariums' Import of Captive Belugas for Research

London, UK (September 4, 2020)—Animal and environmental protection groups applaud the Department of Commerce's decision to prohibit Mystic Aquarium, Connecticut, USA from breeding five captive-born beluga whales from Canada as part of an [import permit](#) issued Friday 28 August. The permit also precludes Mystic from training the whales for performance.

The Connecticut aquarium applied for a permit last year to import the belugas from Marineland, a marine theme park in Niagara Falls, Canada, for the purpose of scientific research. Among other research projects, Mystic proposed behavioral and reproduction studies, including breeding and research on pregnant females and their progeny, raising concerns that the real purpose of the import was to perpetuate the captive beluga population for public display in the United States. Moreover, under a partnership between Mystic and Georgia aquariums, three of the whales could eventually be transferred to Atlanta. The permit conditions clarify that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) must approve any decision to transfer the animals.

In issuing the permit Friday, NMFS authorized seven of Mystic's eight research projects; it did not authorize the study related to reproduction. The permit conditions prohibit the aquariums from breeding the whales, using them in public interactive programs (such as photo opportunities), or training them for performance.

The permit restrictions come after a group of animal and environmental protection organizations submitted comments in December opposing the permit, outlining their substantive legal and policy objections under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). These groups, which included Marine Connection, Animal Welfare Institute, IMMP of EII and other US, Canadian and international organisations, urged the inclusion of the no-breeding and no-performance clauses in a permit if one was issued, as well as the clarification that NMFS — not the permit holder — should make any decisions regarding the disposition of these whales.

NMFS's decision is indicative of a broader global movement in recent years to end the unsustainable and inhumane cetacean trade and public display. The 2013 documentary, 'Blackfish,' had an enormous impact on the public's view of captive orcas. That same year, NMFS denied a request by Georgia Aquarium to import wild-caught Russian belugas for public display. In 2016, SeaWorld ended orca breeding at its parks, and, last year, Canada passed a law to phase out the keeping of cetaceans in captivity in the country.

Before Mystic can import the belugas, the facility must provide NMFS with a detailed contraception plan to prevent breeding, and Canada must issue a permit to export the whales from Marineland. Marine Connection director, Margaux Dodds states; *"Whilst we welcome the stringent conditions which have been put in place by the US on this import, we will continue to urge Canadian authorities not to authorize the move. To allow these belugas to be exported to the US would, in our opinion, undermine all the excellent work which has been carried out by those involved in ending the keeping of cetaceans in captivity in Canada. For many years Mystic has conducted research on the belugas they hold, so why the need to move further whales from Canada, exposing them to the social and psychological trauma this will cause the animals - it just doesn't make sense."*

Canada is currently developing regulatory procedures for issuing export permits for captive cetaceans under its new law and is calling for public submissions; animal advocates support strong and clear requirements in such permits to prohibit breeding and performance. Many countries do not have comparable laws to the MMPA and Canada must ensure any captive cetaceans exported from the country continue to be covered by Canada's powerful legislative protections.

ENDS

Marine Connection is dedicated to the conservation, protection and welfare of dolphins, whales and porpoises. A UK based charitable NGO founded in 1997 working worldwide on cetacean issues, one of our objectives is our ongoing efforts to raise public awareness, inspiring people to help protect dolphins and whales. Conservation and caring begins with education and our vision is to see a world where the life of every dolphin, whale and porpoise matters. Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) for updates on our work and cetacean related news.