

For Immediate Release

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Rescued dolphin alone in ‘swimming pool’-like tank for over 10 years

(October 23, 2018) Martinha is a female common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) who stranded on the coast of Portugal in September 2007. Her rescuers kept her in a tiny backyard concrete ‘swimming pool’, barely more than waist deep, for 10 years. Despite continued assurances that she would be rehabilitated and returned to the wild, it is believed that she is still held in conditions that severely hinder and compromise her welfare.

In 2014, Dr Ingrid Visser, a New Zealand cetacean biologist, and Alexander Sánchez, a Spanish cetacean expert with dolphin rescue experience, conducted a site visit of Martinha’s facility and produced a report that expressed deep concern about her conditions (<https://www.martinha.org/wp-content/uploads/Sanchez-et-al-2014-Martinha-Barra-common-dolphins-rescued-in-Portugal-V-1.0-1.pdf>). As a result of this report, a number of eminent marine mammal scientists, conservationists and NGOs from around the world have worked together ever since in an informal coalition (www.martinha.org), expressing concern about the state of Martinha’s welfare through requests for information about her rehabilitation and offering their assistance to authorities entrusted with her care.

“When we began investigating her case, we learned that the NGO that had rescued Martinha had a second common dolphin known as ‘Barra’, who was sharing Martinha’s barren tank”, stated Sánchez, a member of the coalition. “Sadly, after at least three years of captivity, Barra died. That same NGO had also previously rescued a long-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala melas*), which was later transferred to Lisbon Zoo to perform in shows alongside captive bottlenose dolphins. She too has since died. This pattern of behaviour is gravely concerning, as these are not true ‘rescues’; rather, the animals suffer for years.”

As a wild-born dolphin, Martinha is the Portuguese Government’s responsibility. Together with the NGO that conducted the original rescue, Sociedade Portuguesa da Vida Salvagem (SPVS), officials have recently been non-transparent about her whereabouts. She may have been moved from the backyard tank, but this has not been confirmed, despite the coalition’s inquiries to authorities.

Since August 2014, we have repeatedly offered to cooperate with SPVS on an independent welfare assessment of Martinha. The coalition also offered to assist with a rehabilitation plan and constructive ways in which to improve Martinha’s overall well-being and conditions.

By early August 2016, despite attempts at continued dialogue, SPVS stated that the coalition’s concerns were misplaced and made assurances regarding Martinha’s

wellbeing; however, to date they have offered no supporting evidence for their assurances.

“I have visited more than 30 captive dolphin facilities around the world and Martinha’s tank ranks as one of the worst”, Dr Visser stated. “Having personally witnessed the appalling conditions Martinha and Barra were kept in, I was extremely disappointed to find that SPVS has ignored offers of help from world-renowned experts”.

In its ongoing endeavours to assist Martinha, the coalition has since contacted the Portuguese Instituto da Conservação da Natureza e das Florestas (ICNF), the CITES National Management Authority and the government agency legally mandated to protect Martinha and oversee her care. In its February 2017 reply, the agency advised that Martinha was being “provided with the best medical treatment and housing facilities” at a “new rehabilitation centre that was recently built.” However, to date, no other information, including the location of this new facility, has been forthcoming and all further correspondence to ICNF has been ignored.

Despite assurances of improved conditions for Martinha, she remains a wild-born individual who is being concealed by her rescuers. “At present, we have no idea of her whereabouts, her physical or psychological condition, if she has been held captive alone, or if she is even still alive”, stated Sánchez. “For all these reasons we are going public with our concerns. We hope that the public will pressure ICNF and/or SPVS to release more information regarding her status. Naturally, we still extend our offer to them, for our professionals to assist in improving Martinha’s situation and to give her the best life possible.”

Martinha’s Rescue coalition

#WhereisMartinha

For more information and updates please follow:

Website: martinha.org

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/whereismartinha/>

Twitter @MartinhaDolphin

Photos available. Right: Martinha and Barra were held for years in this tiny ‘backyard swimming pool’-style facility, under the guise of a ‘rescue’. Barra has since died and Martinha has gone ‘missing’ - her whereabouts undisclosed by the facility and the Portuguese Government. Photo credit: martinha.org

