



Critters in Our Midst: Bottlenose Dolphins

by Carol Ellis

Growing up in Ft. Lauderdale, I knew Florida was a magical place, even before there was a Magic Kingdom. Florida was quirky and original, had an abundance of wildlife on land or offshore, and was full of attractions you could find nowhere else in the world.

The undersea world of the Florida Keys and the Bahamas was introduced to those not from here via cutting-edge 1960's technology involving underwater motion picture cameras, which made possible the popular movie and TV series "Flipper." Each 30-minute episode would present a predicament, such as injured divers, or shark attacks, or finding buried treasure, and each time the clever bottlenose dolphin Flipper would come to the rescue. The big ideas of marine preservation and doing what is right would always ring true. There was always a happy ending, it's no wonder at the end of the show you would find yourself singing "Flipper,

Flipper... faster than lightning; No-one you see, is smarter than he..." Sorry about that... I have you baby boomers singing now!



A 1946 (circa) postcard from "Theatre of the Sea" features "Buttons" and "Marty" - posing beautifully while performing their aerobic stunts.

Just as people nowadays want to see their favorite movie stars, kids would want to go see Flipper, the bottle nosed Dolphin (*Tursiops Truncatus*) so they visited the marine parks, which were plentiful at the time. They watched dolphins tail walk, jump 30 ft. in the air to catch a fish from the

trainer's mouth, or jump through a flaming ring. Because of their ability to adapt to human care, as well as learn new behaviors, they are the most studied of all dolphin species. These dolphins performed at 10 - 2 - and 4 - pm and earned their meals for the day.

Unlike wild dolphins, who feed on a variety of sea life including: fish, shrimp, and squid, these captive porpoises, having been in the performing business all their lives, many born in captivity, would not understand how to catch a



Just as people nowadays want to see their favorite movie stars, kids would want to go see Flipper. Photo: State archives of Florida

1970 Flipper, the talented porpoise, does a complete flip during one of her daily performances at Miami Seaquarium. Flipper was played by five female dolphins and one male dolphin. Former "Flipper" dolphins were retired to various Florida attractions. Photo: State archives of Florida

live fish. They only ate cut up dead fish which had added vitamins and fluids necessary for their good health.

One of my early childhood memories was of a souvenir I got while visiting "Flipper" at the 38 acre Miami Seaquarium on Key Biscayne, which was opened in 1955. It was an all day round trip, traveling down US-1. After seeing the show, and visiting all the seals, manatees, turtles and fishtanks, I put a quarter in the Mold-A-Rama machine and watched as hot wax was molded into a dolphin figurine. So cool.



One memory of my childhood was a molded wax dolphin souvenir made while I peered through the Mold-A-Rama's glass dome. The figurine of a blue dolphin leaping over a wave was a best seller.

Tike Miller, the Chicago inventor of the Mold-A-Rama machine, never set out to make one of the most popular vending machines in history, he just wanted to replace a broken figurine for his holiday nativity set. He experimented with a new

Bottlenose Dolphins CONTINUED Photos by Carol Ellis except as noted.



The last Mold-A-Rama machine was built in the 1960s. This plastic injection molding machine could make a wax souvenir for anyone with twenty five cents

plastic injection process, and made thousands of wax dinosaurs, space invaders and jungle animals before he sold the business in the late 1950s.

Well you ask, why is this so important? The history of the "state of the art" then vs now is what makes this interesting. What happens when the show is over, literally? With attendance down, and protests up, the number of marine parks has declined steadily. Many of these facilities are

desperately searching for homes for their retired dolphins.

And the wide-eyed children, they've moved on. The attentions of today's generation of children are fixed on 21st Century innovations. not the



Dolphins performed tricks, jumped trough flaming hoops, and retrieved shiny dimes all for a fishy treat.



Flipper's Sea School on Grassy Key was where the film star Flipper (aka Mitzi) was trained, and a 30-ft. tall monument to a dolphin mother and baby stands today at the currently named "Dolphin Research Center.

engineering technology of the 20th Century which made possible the Overseas Highway connecting the mainland to Key West.

The new generation's role models are from the Avatar series. With human-like animation, its theme is centered around the conflict between indigenous populations, and their deep will to survive, versus their oppressors' intentions, which would cause environmental destruction of their world. The undersea creatures of Pandora in "The Way of the Water" were filmed using



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The Theatre of the Sea was originally (1907) a quarry that supplied rock for Henry Flagler's railroad. In 1946 it was repurposed into a dolphin aquarium by the McKenney family, making it one of the oldest marine parks in the world. Photo: State archives of Florida

high-fidelity motion capture, known as performance capture, which uses multiple cameras and sensors to capture facial expressions, and impart real-life mannerisms onto a human-like animation. From an efficiency perspective, it is far easier to teach a human to act, hold their breath, to swim, jump or dive than to train a real animal. With advances in microchips and processors and the speed of computing, finer, more precise movements are possible.

One day humans will not be able to recognize the difference between real and unreal reality. And perhaps we will never have to go outdoors ever again.

A VR headset may work for me as far as going in the ocean is concerned. I made a pact with the fish long ago: you don't come on my land and I won't go into your water.



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