

## **MS Thesis Defense**

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**Title:** Public Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behavior Towards Dolphins and Dolphin Conservation

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### **ABSTRACT**

In 2015, an online survey was conducted to investigate public attitudes toward key cetacean (whale, dolphin, and porpoise) conservation and 'hot topic' issues such as legislative protection, whaling, and captivity (n=858). Importance of the use of social media by scientists and conservationists and its accuracy was also addressed. When given a list of whale and dolphin species, 24.01% participants thought the blue whale was the most endangered, 22.14% thought it was the humpback whale, and 23.43% stated the killer whale. Additionally, participants were also asked which species listed was the most important to conserve: 39.74% indicating the bottlenose dolphin was the most important. Only 6.29% highlighted the most endangered cetacean (the Vaquita or Gulf of California harbor porpoise) and 5.01% noted the endangered North Atlantic right whale. More members of the public highlighted non-existent (fake) species as being of conservation concern than certain species of genuine concern (e.g. Pigmy short-finned whale, Lump-headed dolphin, and Majestic spotted dolphin). The majority of participants considered dolphins and whales to be "under protected" or only "slightly protected" (29.95%; 41.96%, respectively) and expressed that marine mammal conservation laws and policies were "very important" or "important" (47.43%; and 37.88%, respectively). In addition, 86.83% of

participants expressed opposition to the hunting of dolphins and whales (57.93% "strongly opposed" and 28.90% "opposed"); however, only 47.44% of participants were aware that several countries are still involved in whaling. Participants were divided on opposition or support of dolphins and whales in marine parks and aquariums (54.43%; 45.57% respectively). But 86.01% or 6 times as many members of the public preferred to view cetaceans in the wild via-whale watching than in captivity, and a majority noted that cetaceans should only be kept in captivity when dolphins are sick or injured, for conducting research relevant to dolphin conservation in the wild, and for conducting research on captive dolphin rearing and breeding (husbandry). A lack of awareness of the conservation status of whales and dolphins and continued whaling activities suggests that greater outreach to the public about the conservation status of whale and dolphin species is needed.