

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCERhttp://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/opinion/304027_dolphins18.html***Ludicrous dolphin plan shows we are scared silly****Sunday, February 18, 2007***By BRENDA PETERSON**
GUEST COLUMNIST

When news of the U.S. Navy's anti-terrorism plan to deploy Atlantic bottlenose dolphins to patrol the Bangor submarine base made headlines here in the Puget Sound region, I was contacted by concerned citizens called Knitting for Dolphins.com. This group is symbolically knitting sweaters to keep the dolphins from freezing to death in our Puget Sound.

"Is this a joke?" I asked Jan Bailey, wildlife rehabilitator and member of Knitting for Dolphins.

"We think it's more a tragic irony," says Bailey, "and not nearly as ridiculous as the Navy believing they can transport and keep warm-water dolphins humanely alive in our frigid waters."

Adds marine mammal biologist Dr. Toni Frohoff, "When the Navy argues that their dolphins 'do very well' because they do not die, that doesn't mean the dolphins may not be suffering unbearable cruelty."

If it weren't so dangerous for the dolphins, the Navy's project would be laughable. Even the headline --"anti-terrorism dolphins" -- seems silly to those of us who have long studied marine mammals. We fear that such an animal deployment will be fatal for the dolphins and introduce a non-native species into a Puget Sound already facing dead zones, endangered orcas, lethal Navy sonar and insidious pollution. But the article reminded me that as a child I had once called upon dolphins as an anti-terror strategy during the Cold War's endless duck-and-cover drills.

Living close to the ground-zero of Washington, D.C., I first claimed dolphins as my imaginary friends. A benevolent Ichthyosaur I called Iki was my first line of defense against Russian terrorists plotting every moment to drop an atomic bomb on our elementary school. I certainly would not hide under my desk. No, at the end of the world, I'd call for Iki to carry me away from this fiery land and back to the safety of the sea. This was my own civil defense plan; and when I compared it with what our government promised about emergency bus evacuation -- to where? -- or my parents' fervent explanation of a Biblical Rapture when God lifted up righteous people mid-air for eternity, my plan seemed a lot more practical.

Now almost half a century later, terrorism again grips our collective imagination; scientists again have moved the Atomic Clock setting at five minutes to midnight, and the imaginary friends of my childhood are once again called into

active duty, not by a child's imagination, but by a military mind so obsessed with self-defense that we terrorize ourselves -- and other species.

If the Navy bottlenose dolphins being drafted for Puget Sound defense are like those I met years ago in Sugarloaf Key, we will need more than knitted sweaters to assuage our guilt. During my three decades of studying dolphins around the world, I have never seen such bedraggled, broken, and bewildered dolphins as those the Navy sent for "rehabilitation" to the Sugarloaf Dolphin Sanctuary.

One particular dolphin, Luther, was captured by the Navy, conscripted into such unnatural services as wearing harnesses to carry bombs, using his sophisticated sonar to detect underwater military targets and identifying "enemy" swimmers. Luther's gray face was etched in long scars, as if he'd been slashed in sword fights or duels. Though his natural smile promised playfulness, Luther's manner was skittish, as if his spirit had been shattered or he suffered from battle fatigue. Whenever a human came near, he hung back in fear.

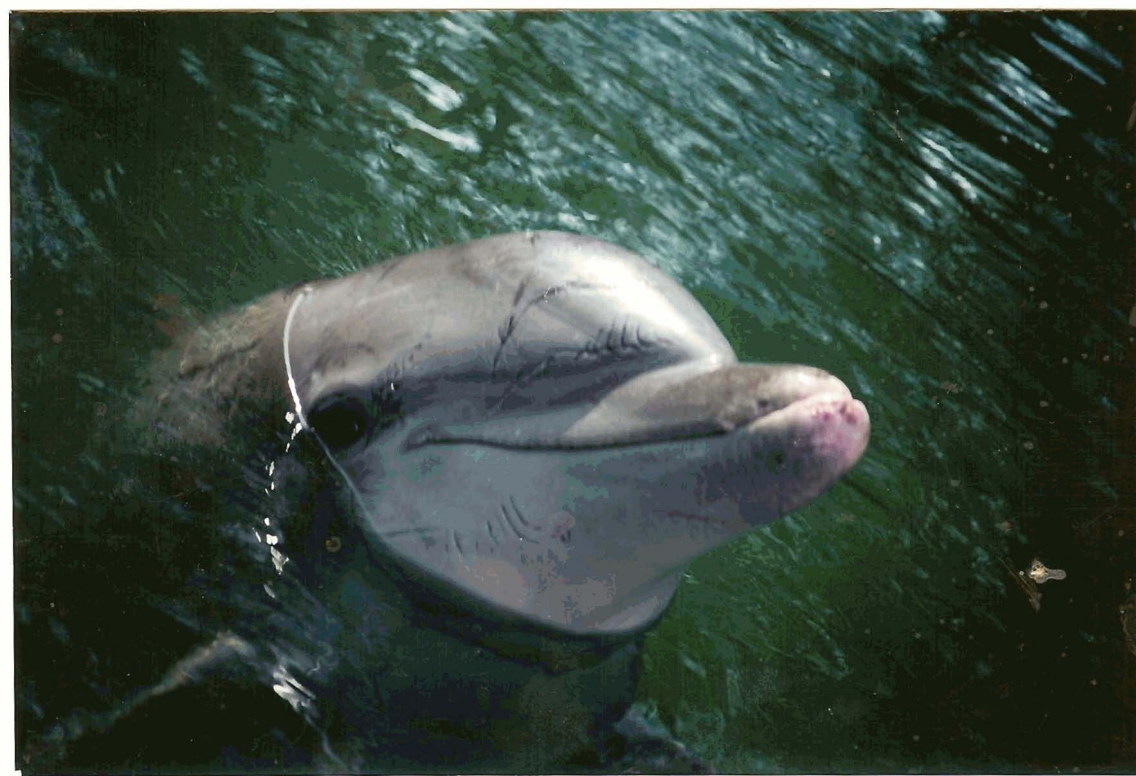
Along with two other bottlenose, Buck and Jack, Luther had been released from military duty after tireless crusading by Dr. Naomi Rose of the Humane Society of the United States; she persuaded the Navy that these dolphins did not belong in military research. The Navy had already discovered that dolphins made very bad soldiers: They preferred to play with, rather than attack, designated enemies. Luther's real-life story has been told in such popular novels and films as *Day of the Dolphin*, but few people know the plight of the Navy dolphins after their usefulness is over. Like so many other captive dolphins, these "soldier boys," cannot be easily retired or returned to the wild. They must be retrained to fish for themselves; they have lost the close-knit protection of their family pod and may not survive the rigors of the open ocean.

Yet I watched diligent ex-aquarium and ex-military trainers at Sugarloaf Dolphin Sanctuary try to restore these Navy dolphins to health. Luther's battered face and haunted eyes told me that he was now an in-between creature, caught between captivity and the open sea that beckoned brightly just beyond his saltwater lagoon. At any moment, Luther could leap free, but he and the other Navy dolphins were not psychologically or physically ready to return.

"Prisoners of our wars, that's how I think of these guys," one of the rehab volunteers told me as we watched Luther watching us -- as if we humans were the real terrorists.

Dolphins have nothing to do with terror. They are antidotes not to terrorists, but to terror itself. While they are distractible and way too playful as soldiers; they are remarkable teachers. Models of strong family bonds, language skills, and altruism, dolphin intelligence rivals humans and other primates in their capacity for self-awareness. Recently researchers discovered that many cetacean brains possess the same spindle cells as humans; these cells produce feelings of love and attachment. It may seem like a no-brainer to say that dolphins, long beloved by humans, are also capable of expressing devotion one to another. The ethical question here is whether we humans have the moral right to impose our own aggression and terrorism on an equally intelligent species?

Dolphins are not domesticated beasts, like horses, to carry the burden of our warfare. Before drafting dolphins as soldiers, perhaps we should understand how wild dolphins deal with violence among themselves. If a young dolphin is too aggressive, his mother or auntie will forcibly butt him to teach him proper pod boundaries. If the aggression continues, the elders will evoke the most dreaded experience -- they will hold down the young calf to suggest drowning. Death by drowning is always a risk for a dolphin, since they take every breath consciously and will stop breathing if knocked out. Breathless reprimand is usually enough to stop youthful aggression.



But should the violence continue, the pod will shut out that individual. Utterly dejected, the exiled dolphin may finally die of loneliness or abandonment. The dolphins' intense need for affection, for a highly complex social life, is the survival tool that has determined his species' evolution.

Humans, by contrast, have often elevated the most aggressive individual, someone who favors strategic thinking, goal-rather-than-social communication, and violence as first response to any threat. We have increased our brain size in response to stress and survival of the fittest. But are we, like dolphins, now capable of a more conscious evolution? Can we learn from dolphins, if we can stop ourselves from killing and enslaving them?

In this time when terrorism can take us backwards into a primitive intelligence riveted on fight or flight, might we suggest to the military mind that we are not yet frightened out of our wits, or our evolution? Might we say a resounding no to drafting warm-natured dolphins into our chilly waters? We can tell the military what any child knows -- that dolphins teach us more about knitting together enlightened survival and life than terror ever will.

Brenda Peterson is the author of "BUILD ME AN ARK: A Life with Animals" and co-editor with Toni Frohoff of "BETWEEN SPECIES: Celebrating the Dolphin-Human Bond" (Sierra Club.)