

From the Weekend Voice
St. Lucia
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Stakeholders Optimistic, but:
ENVIRONMENTALISTS WANT TO DISPEL FANTASEAS
By Micah George

Picture caption : A dolphin jumps through a hoop

Dolphin Fantaseas and Classic Tours Ltd. are upbeat about their project of building a dolphin pen at Tapion Bay in which people could swim and play with dolphins despite objections from local environmentalists and animal rights activists.

Roger Sutherland of M&C Limited representing Classic Tours Ltd - a company formed with Michael Chastanet and Lynn Hassel and Bud Krames of Dolphin Fantaseas Thursday met the press to discuss the project, answer questions and dispel certain concerns and myths about dolphins and the project itself.

The trio has already held discussions with persons who have expressed their objections to the project. However this has not dampened the enthusiasm of either Classic Tours or Dolphin Fantaseas in pressing forward in getting governmental approval.

Classic Tours is the vehicle being used to bring the project to reality. Dolphin Fantaseas will be providing the expertise and construct the pen. According to Sutherland once the project has been approved M&C will have a 30 per cent share in the business. Michael Chastanet will also have a 30 per cent share in the business. The rest of the shares (40%) will go to Dolphin Fantaseas.

An application from Classic Tours Ltd to the Development Control Authority for approval to set up a 'swim with the dolphins' programme is still with the DCA. That application was delivered in June 2002.

Hassel and Krames explained that the negative feedback received about the project, particularly about dolphin in captivity are untrue and are from people who, although sincerely believing what they say, speak more from an emotional point of view rather than from a scientific and factual viewpoint.

The Dolphin Fantaseas duo said that their company has 90 years of combined experience in managing marine mammals. The company's mission, as expressed by Hassel is to increase public education, maintain vital conservation and get individuals to attain an appreciation for marine life.

The company has been designing interactive programmes for the past 15 years and has two Dolphin Encounter facilities in the Caribbean namely

Antigua and Anguilla.

If granted approval St. Lucia will be the third Caribbean country to which Dolphin Fantaseas will introduce its 'swim with the dolphin' programme.

Both Classic Tours Ltd and Dolphin Fantaseas have given the thumbs up to Tapion Bay as the best place to set up shop. The two sides scouted the western coastline of the island from Marigot to Casenbar for sites, selecting six possible locations. Tapion Bay received the nod because of its size and natural structure. In the eyes of Classic Tours and Dolphin Fantaseas Tapion Bay is the perfect natural habitat for a venture such as the one they are proposing.

In fact both sides agreed that Tapion Bay would be the largest of its kind in which the 'swim with the dolphin' project has been held. The water quality at Tapion is good, according to Krames, so too is the clarity of the water and the depth.

An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the area would have to be done before a decision is made concerning the application before the DCA. Should Classic Tours and Dolphin Fantaseas be given the green light to set up shop at Tapion, which incidentally would cost about US\$1 million, the dolphins they intend to use in their interactive programme would be caught in St. Lucian waters. They have already applied for permission to catch about six bottlenose dolphins to be trained for the swim with the dolphin interactive programme.

Hassel said that the local tourism industry would benefit from the project in that St. Lucia would be more competitive in the tourism market. She also added that the country will benefit economically from the project from income generated from persons employed, training St. Lucians in the care and maintenance of the mammals, private transportation and restaurants will make more business with the added visitors the project will pull.

The company plans to offer educational programmes to school children about marine mammals and to work with the Ministry of Education along these lines. "We are hoping to provide an excellent tourism product for the island. We have the competence to develop this project." Hassel said. As pointed out earlier approval is yet to be given for the project, an approval critics hope would never be given. The critics claimed that Dolphin Fantaseas poses a serious threat to the welfare of dolphins in that the company is causing an increase in the captures, lifelong confinement, and commercial exploitation of dolphins. They claimed that the key to understanding why captivity of dolphins is wrong is understanding what dolphins are like in nature.

According to the critics dolphins are severely restricted in using their sonar when in captivity. They can't use it to catch live fish as they are fed dead fish as food rewards. They can't put it to full use to explore their underwater world because there is not much to explore in a barren, concrete tank or a small cage

in the sea. They can't use it to navigate because they aren't going anywhere. Sensory deprivation is one of the most damaging aspects of keeping dolphins in captivity.

Both Hassel and Krames dismissed those claims noting that dolphins in public display facilities have a better chance of being healthy and live as long in marine life parks, aquariums and zoos as they do in the wild. These marine mammals do very well when they are in the care of responsible public display facilities. They breed successfully, form complex social groups, and exhibit excellent physical health.

The dolphins in marine life parks, aquariums and zoos consume consistently high quality, nutritional food, receive excellent medical attention, and are kept free of debilitating parasites. This is in stark contrast to the predators, disease, pollution, well-documented commercial fishing and recreational boating dangers, and other stress they face at sea, resulting in thousands of death each year.

Krames said that they search for a facility that meets a number of standards. "The first thing we use as criteria is the international standards which are basically based on the US Department of Agriculture and Animal Health Inspection Service of the United States. We need a depth of a minimum of nine feet. We need a large expanse area. We need water quality and water clarity. These are the first criteria we look at. Once we identify that we look at additional support access to the facility." Krames said.