TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT of HB 5341
AN ACT PROHIBITING THE SALE AND BREEDING OF CERTAIN CETACEANS
March 5, 2020

To: The Honorable Co-Chairs Senator Cohen and Representative Demicco and Distinguished Members of the Environment Committee

From: Naomi A. Rose, Ph.D., marine mammal scientist, Animal Welfare Institute

Thank you very much for the opportunity to present this testimony.

Since 2010, when a captive male orca brutally killed his trainer in Florida, the general public has evolved its view of keeping captive cetaceans (whales, dolphins, and porpoises) in small enclosures. The public no longer sees captive cetaceans as willing entertainers or research subjects, but instead as long-suffering, wide-ranging, intelligent and highly social predators who cannot truly thrive no matter how “state-of-the-art” an artificial enclosure is. This evolution is reflected in a growing number of legislative initiatives, in the United States and around the world, to phase out the captive display of cetaceans.

HB 5341 will not stop the research or display of cetaceans already in Connecticut, all of whom are held at Mystic Aquarium. These animals are grandfathered in the bill’s provisions. It will stop the acquisition and breeding of new individuals, to ensure that the current cetaceans at Mystic Aquarium are the last generation held in the state.

While we appreciate the value of the research done at Mystic Aquarium over the years, as we explain in great detail in the attached comments (which a coalition of nonprofit groups submitted to the US National Marine Fisheries Service in response to Mystic Aquarium’s application for a permit to import five beluga whales from Canada), this research program does not require more cetaceans to be held in Connecticut. This work can continue without relocating animals, with a far larger sample size, sending samples from other facilities’ animals to the aquarium’s laboratories at the University of Connecticut for analysis.

This bill is in step with the growing consensus in the state, the country, and the world that cetaceans cannot thrive in captivity and should no longer be used for entertainment, exhibition, or even research on a permanent basis. While some work can only be done on captive animals, these studies can be undertaken with animals held only temporarily or animals held in seaside sanctuaries. Such sanctuaries, long only a concept, are well on their way to becoming reality, with a beluga sanctuary in Iceland scheduled to become operational this spring and another recently announcing that a site has been selected in Nova Scotia, Canada.

We strongly urge your support for HB 5341. It is progressive, reasonable, and allows for a gradual transition to a future where no more cetaceans suffer in small tanks. Thank you for your consideration of our testimony and the attached comment letter.