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DISABLED BUT NOT DISCOUNTED: A CASE STUDY OF TWO *TURSIOPS TRUNCATUS*

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Zoological facilities and aquariums have housed disabled animals for years, but they are rarely integrated into educational shows or public interactions. As the prevalence of disabled animals in human care increases, their trainers and zookeepers are challenged with the task of creating new and innovative animal care, training, and enrichment techniques (Hepting 2006). The training staff at Dolphins Plus (Key Largo, Florida) has developed unique integration programs for two, special needs dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) in their care.

Dolphins Plus is a marine mammal research and education facility located approximately 60 miles south of Miami in Key Largo, Florida. The facility lies on a canal, immediately adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean. The proximity to the ocean produces a 0.6 - 0.9m tidal exchange that acts as a natural filtration system. The dolphin habitats resemble a mangrove ecosystem, with typical flora and fauna and a limestone/soft sediment substrate. This natural seawater setting provides an enriching environment for the resident dolphins (*T. truncatus*) and sea lion (*Zalophus californianus*).

The Dolphins Plus population consists of 15 Atlantic bottlenose dolphins distributed amongst two dolphin habitats (approximate depth and area: 4.5 m and 3000 m²) that are separated by the canal. The first case study involved a visually impaired, female *T. truncatus* named "Jessica", who is estimated to be approximately 25 years old and lives in an enclosure containing 3.5 dolphins. The second case study involved a deaf, visually impaired, and neurologically challenged, female, offshore *T. truncatus* named "Castaway", who was rescued in 2007 and is estimated to be approximately 35 years old. Castaway lives in an enclosure containing 1.6 dolphins.