



August 1, 1994.

Mr. Jim Fullilove,
Editor
National Fisherman
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Dear Mr. Fullilove:

By means of this letter I want to respond to a great number of unfounded, defamatory, and libelous allegations made against me and my work in the article "Facts, Lies and Videotape," by Mick Kronman, which was published in the August 1994 issue of National Fisherman.

1. I am not or have never been an "animal-rights crusader" as depicted in your article. I am a professional biologist; my Ph.D. was earned at the University of Miami in 1984. Since that time I have taught at Venezuelan and American universities. I have published over 300 articles, including 17 papers and 4 books on marine mammals dating back to 1973 (the only books on Venezuelan marine mammals ever published) (see enclosed cv).

2. The statement made that I "visited Venezuela last year to chronicle a widely acknowledged fact ..." implies that at that time I was not a resident of Venezuela. That is nor true since, except for the time I have been a university student, first in Europe and later in the United States, I have always been a resident of that country until recently when I was forced to leave.

I left the country with my family in response to an avalanche of death threats against my family's life and my own. The callers, who identified themselves as being "in high places", described my wife, young daughters, and my daughters' school schedules in some detail. That made those threats seem credible. They were truly frightening in light of the U.S. State Department's 1994 "Report on Human Rights" wherein it is concluded that in 1993 in Venezuela "extrajudicial killings by the security forces continued. . . . 66 of those killings were carried out by the metropolitan police, 33 by state police, 22 by the Intelligence Police (DISIP), 21 by the

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National Guard, 16 by the Judicial Technical police (PTJ), 11 by the armed forces, 8 by municipal police, and 10 by other branches of the security apparatus. The perpetrators act with near impunity, as the Government rarely brings charges against them."

In the same "Report on Human Rights", it is stated in the general introduction to the Venezuelan section that "serious human rights abuses continued in 1993. They included arbitrary and excessively lengthy detentions, abuse of detainees, extrajudicial killings by the police and military, . . ." It is further stated under the heading "Denial of Fair Public Trial" that "The justice system is overburdened, corrupt, and inefficient."

The Venezuelan press is reporting that I will be charged with treason. The charge of treason is evidence that the government is now resorting to a legal campaign to silence me in addition to its waging a propaganda war.

3. You mention that "United Nations statistics suggest the overall health of the region's dolphin stocks isn't threatened." I do not know of such statistics and the writer should provide the appropriate reference, otherwise such statement must be considered to be a groundless one.

4. The version of the Venezuelan government that Prof. Ignacio Agudo, the head of a local environmental group called Fundacetacea, and myself got the fishermen drunk is groundless. We never paid the fishermen at all nor we promised them anything. We did, however, present them with the customary gratuity at the end of our trip, namely a bottle of rum (cost: U.S.\$0.95). We also left them the 4 gal. of gasoline that we had earlier purchased directly from a gas station to fill their spare can. We had purchased this gasoline to ensure our safe return because fishermen in this area customarily embark with only the minimum amount necessary for a journey. It is ludicrous to imply by disparaging their literacy that 95 cents worth of rum and a small amount of gasoline is substantial payment to these fishermen who receive US \$70/kg for the shark fins they sell after having using dolphin meat as bait.

Furthermore, nowhere in the 2-hour uncut and unedited copy of the full footage video Mr. Russ Rector provided Mr. Kronman with, are the fishermen been seen drinking at all.

5. You say that "according to Venezuelan authorities (the video) is a fake." However, we neither hired the fishermen nor their boat. We were invited by two fishermen to accompany them on one of their frequent and customary dolphin-hunting trips. No directions were issued nor were any needed. At the beginning of the video one can hear the fisherman who later harpoons the dolphin saying "usamos la carne de tonina como carnada para pescar cazones" (we use dolphin's meat as a bait for shark fishing). The harpoon is designed specifically for hunting dolphins; one village specializes in its

manufacture. The harpooner clearly displays skill in using his weapon; harpooning dolphins is his livelihood. The harpooner and the captain can be heard throughout the tape coordinating their efforts. After its capture, the harpooner can be heard exclaiming "Ahora si vamos a tener carne" (Now we're going to have meat.) We can be heard expressing sadness at the plight of the dolphin and requesting them NOT to kill a second one.

The fishermen brought the wounded animal to the beach for butchering. The fishermen can be seen severing the dolphin's head. It is obviously in great pain and suffering. Prof. Agudo and I were sickened and distressed by its agony and our expressions of disgust are clearly heard on the tape. During a pause in the fisherman's decapitating the still living and thrashing animal, I can be heard on tape requesting a merciful end to its misery by saying "Por Favor! Terminen de matar al animal!" (Please! Finish killing the animal!)

This is hardly the "script" of a fake video.

6. You say in your article that "There are several versions of the film - short ones, long ones, ones with no audio, ones with subtitles. Each is edited to match a particular political spin." You are right by saying that there are several versions; however Mr. Kronman fails to mention that Mr. Rector provided him with a copy of the unedited, uncut version of the original raw footage, and he also fails to mention that the other edited versions have been circulated by Venezuelan government officials and its agents. We have been able to get a copy of one of those versions (the subtitled one) in which the subtitles depict inaccurate translations into English of things I never said or claiming words said by the fishermen as mine. Thee order of events was changed and audio portions were taken out of the original footage and superimposed to different video images. So if there is any fraud here it is being committed by the Venezuelan government and its agents.

7. You quote me as saying in one of the videos that the harpooned dolphins "will be used for research." And that is true. That dolphin's head was meristically measured and deposited in the La Salle Museum of Natural History in Caracas for further research. The data gathered during this and other trips to that area have been used by Prof. Agudo and myself in two articles and one book already published, and in two more scientific articles in preparation. An example of those publications is Romero, A. & I. Agudo. 1993, "La Situación de la Conservación de Cetáceos en Venezuela. Informe 1993.", Caracas: Bioma and Fundacetacea, 51 pp.

8. You say that I "directing the cameraman (say) <that's it, get the blood. Make sure you get all the blood>." However, I was the cameraman myself. Once again you used the government-doctored tape as the source of your information, not the original, uncut one.

9. You also say that "at one point, Romero even helps the fisherman by handing him a knife to flense the dolphin." That is totally untrue. If you watch the original, uncut version of the video, you can see that I never gave a knife to the fisherman. I never carried a knife. I was videotaping at that moment.

10. You also say that "Infuriated Venezuelan officials indicted Romero, accusing him of fraud, treason and killing a dolphin." That is also not true. I have never been sentenced of any crime since no criminal trial has taken place against me. I have never been charged with fraud or treason. Prof. Agudo and myself have been charged with "the killing of a dolphin," a ridiculous charge since the video shows that we never touched the animal. Furthermore, the fishermen who actually committed the crime have been freed by the Venezuelan authorities which clearly shows what are the Venezuelan government true intentions: not to punish the criminals but those who prove the authorities' incompetence in stopping an ecological crime. In this instance, we were in fact engaged in biological research investigating the situation behind the many reports in the scientific literature on the link between dolphin mortality and shark line fishing. We were documenting by videotape what we found so that the facts could not be disputed.

Many publications in the last 24 years report the systematic killing of dolphins by Venezuelan fishermen. These publications report routine intentional slaughter rather than accidental ones from use of fishing nets.

Two readily available references are:

A) Caldwell, D.K. & M.C. Caldwell. 1971. Porpoise Fisheries in the Southern Caribbean- Present Utilizations and Future Potentials. Proc. 23rd Annual Session Gulf and Caribbean Fish. Inst.:195-206 (J.B. Higman, ed.). Willemstad, Curacao, November 1970. Published in Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami, Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science (see p. 200).

B) Van Waerebeek, K. 1990. Preliminary notes on the existence of a dolphin by-catch off French Guiana. Aquatic Mammals 16:71-73 (see p. 71).

In addition, we have copies of the reports and letters from witnesses' accounts that document the same practices written by scientists, sailors, Venezuelan government officials, a fishermen's union, and conservation foundation officials sent to other scientists and Venezuelan government officials.

11. You quoted me by saying that "what you don't hear in the video is that the fishermen told us on the beach before we left - that they do kill dolphins for bait, on a regular basis." Actually, if you review the video Mr. Rector provided Mr. Kronman with, the first thing you hear is precisely that, so I do not have to make

oral allegations for something I have hard proof of.

12. You quote the fishermen as saying things about me that are false. However you do not question the fact that, if they actually killed the dolphins, why they have been set free by the Venezuelan government while us, the researchers who denounced a well known fact by using a video, are the ones being persecuted. This makes you wonder about the credibility of their testimony.

13. The allegation made in your publication about the video as a "payback for that country's policy of harvesting dolphin-associated tuna in the eastern Pacific" is absolutely false. Here is where some people attempt to confuse the issue but, in doing so, reveal what may be the major economic motivation for the reaction by Venezuelan officials and their agents.

The use of purse-seine nets by tuna boats, both Venezuelan and others, in the Eastern Pacific Ocean has resulted in massive dolphin kills. The population of spotted dolphins (*Stenella attenuata*) has decreased to "at best" 28% of its original size and has not recovered since 1975, despite some reduction in the mortality caused by the tuna fleet (Federal Register, Vol. 58, no. 209, November 1, 1993, pp. 58285-58298). Venezuela currently operates 40% of the tuna fleet in that area and is thus largely responsible for this situation.

As an indication of the official position on dolphins, Francisco Herrera-Terán, a long time employee of the fishing industry in Venezuela publicly declared when he was Fisheries Director (Ministry of Agriculture): "The dolphin is not in danger of extinction. We are talking about 25,000 dolphins out of a population of 12 to 14 million. Should we let half a million people of hunger to save 25,000 dolphins because (of the television program) Flipper? If this is the attitude, within ten years we could have embargoes against people who eat rabbits because of Bugs Bunny." [From the April 1991 edition of the Venezuelan English magazine "Business Venezuela" (#135, p.12)].

As a consequence of the practices that embody these attitudes, there is an embargo in the U.S. against tuna caught by Venezuela's ships (and those of other nations) in the Eastern Pacific. The first embargo started in 1988 and the second was imposed in 1992, i.e., well before our campaign to save Venezuelan dolphins. The reason for such embargoes has been the failure of the Venezuelan government to reduce dolphin mortality in the Eastern Pacific as specified in the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act. Not only that, but Venezuela refused in 1992 to comply with the offer of the U.S. Congress through the Studd's Act (The International Dolphin Conservation Act) to lift the embargo if Venezuela would reduce dolphin mortality in the Eastern Pacific to zero by 1996.

Tuna exports are an important source of revenue for the tuna

industry and an important source of foreign exchange. According to documents from the U.S. State Department, Venezuela has spent over US \$ 2,000,000 through the well-known firm Arnold & Porter (1200 New Hampshire Ave., NW, Washington, D.C.) lobbying to have the ban lifted. The government is extremely touchy about any publicity that reveals its insensitivity towards the slaughter of dolphins. Their reaction to my revelations is clearly in line with the ancient practice of killing the bearer of bad news.

14. You quote Mr. Herrera-Terán as "Dr. Herrera-Teran" and as saying that "call the timing of the film-release a coincidence. If you must. But I don't believe in coincidence. I believe in synchronicity." First of all, Mr. Herrera-Terán has not a doctorate. If he made you to believe so, he has embarked in fraud. Also, he lies when claiming a relationship between the releasing of the video in the US and the Tuna-embargo issues.

Among the major conservation and environmental concerns in Venezuela is the practice of hunting and killing dolphins. Two environmental groups that have maintained their independence to investigate such activities by refusing to accept government money are Bioma and Fundacetacea. Ignacio Agudo, a professor of biology and museum curator as well as the president of Fundacetacea, and I, as a research biologist and executive director of Bioma, both Venezuelan environmental groups that have never received government money, travelled to the areas where such killing occurs and investigated the situation. We collected data that included photographs and skeletons of butchered dolphins and a videotape of the practices. The tape was made in February 1993, exclusively to document the reasons behind the many reports of dolphin killings and to show why numerous dolphin skeletons were appearing regularly and frequently on nearby beaches.

We presented the evidence to the Venezuelan Attorney General's office in an attempt to move the government from its continued inaction in the face of earlier published reports of these activities. We released our findings to the Venezuelan public in May 1993. Despite a massive public outcry, the government still did nothing to stop the killing. We also collected 45,000 signatures in Venezuela that requested the government to take actions that we enumerated that would protect these marine mammals. This request was never responded to by the authorities.

Later, in November 1993, our videotape depicting the brutal slaying of a dolphin in Venezuela was shown on television news broadcasts in several U.S. cities. As a consequence, both the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington, D.C., and the Venezuelan Consulate General's office in Miami, Florida, claimed to have received over twenty thousands letters of protest from the American public.

A counterattack was launched against us personally that has included criminal charges, threats, a massive media war (including

planting false stories in publications like yours), and electronic messages.

15. Mr. Herrera-Terán is also lying when says that "the Venezuelan government isn't looking for Romero, but if they find him, he could spend the next 20 years in jail." First, the Venezuelan government has issued an arrest warrant against me and has put in charge of my search in the U.S. a National Guard general with a very bad reputation in terms of Human Rights who has threatened with "violence" against me and other people who criticize the Venezuelan government stance's on dolphin killings. Second, even If I were convicted of the only crime I have been accused of in Venezuela, the "killing of a dolphin," the maximum sentence is 8 months in prison.

His allegations are part of a Venezuelan propaganda campaign designed to cover up the practice of slaughtering dolphins by attempting to discredit those who are exposing this practice.

16. I am extremely surprised that Mr. Kronman does not mention a "diagram" sent to him by Mr. Herrera-Terán where he accuses me of receiving money from such a variety of sources such as the Starkist Corporation, Sun Oil, Pew Charitable Trust, Earth Island Institute, Monitor, Earth Island Institute, the Dolphin Freedom Foundation, Adena (the World Wildlife Fund Affiliate in Spain), and from Spanish and French fishing industries. Such ridiculous allegations should dump any source's credibility before the eyes of the serious investigative reporter.

17. You also mention that "The American public wants solutions, not theater." The video we made was used in Bioma and Fundacetacea's educational Dolphin Campaign. This campaign started in 1992 with "The Day of the Dolphin" program aimed at school children all around Venezuela. This educational program was announced on TV, radio, and through a supplement published in Venezuela's largest national newspaper, El Universal.

This program was carried out jointly with the Ministry of Education and was scheduled as an annual event each October 23. Over 20,000 kids from all over Venezuela have participated in such programs. In October 1993 we collected over 45,000 signatures which were delivered to the Venezuelan National Congress in a petition that requested a) the creation of a dolphin sanctuary in the eastern coasts of Venezuela (where most killing occurs), b) the establishment of a national Marine Mammal Protection Act; and, c) the official recognition of October 23 as the "Day of the Dolphin" for educational purposes.

Our report to the Attorney General's office made it clear that we were not recommending nor interested in the prosecution of the individual fishermen shown in our videotape. Rather we were interested in overall protection for the dolphins. Such protection

must include dealing with the fishermen who are merely economic pawns of the international trade in shark fins. It is unfortunate that the Venezuelan government never responded to our offers to assist in these matters. Even though there is massive popular support, the administration officials exhibit total disregard for the workings of a participative democracy as well as disrespect toward public opinion. It is also sad that by ignoring the problem except to vilify those who report on it, the government does not choose to help improve the fishermen's economic possibilities and living standards.

Thus, the actions from our side are hardly part of any theatrical display.

Venezuela is now going through very difficult economic times. Governments under siege, as is the case in Venezuela, often look for a scapegoat to divert attention from their own shortcomings. And people like Mr. Herrera-Terán adopt the "big lie" approach to cover up senseless killing of dolphins that continues today.

A proof of the later can be found in a documentary made by the syndicated tv show "American Journal." Their producers sent to Venezuela an investigative reporter who caught on camera the fishermen of the very same village where we made our video. They acknowledged that they have been killing dolphins for many years and continue to do so.

I will not be intimidated in the conduct of my scientific research or in reporting its results by the actions of Venezuelan officials. I intend to continue my efforts to protect the dolphins and am demanding a retraction of falsehoods spread by the vicious campaign against me by the Venezuelan government and its agents which you published.

Sincerely,

Aldemaro Romero, Ph.D.
Adjunct Associate Professor of Biology.