

The Endangered Killer Whale

A killer whale, or *Orcinus Orca*, is one of the most misunderstood mammals of our time. As a predator, the killer whale's job is to hunt, to harm, to prey. Though their hunting tactics are different than other toothed whales in the dolphin family, the orca is often misjudged for their distinct pattern of ruthlessness. The orca is not only misinterpreted, it is also hunted and killed for the precious oils within their body. Now an endangered species, the orca is at risk of extinction and elimination. There is an urgent need to protect orcas from extinction.

Orcas are often misunderstood because they are known as killer whales. The name originated centuries ago when humans feared them because of their size and predatory skills. Often referred to as wolves of the sea, orcas live and hunt together in pods, or family groups, much like a pack of wolves (National Geographic). They hunt everything including fish, walrus, seals, sea lions, penguins, squid, sea turtles, sharks, and even other kinds of whales (National Geographic). Due to their voracious appetites as well as their place at the top of the ocean food chain, orcas are very susceptible to pollution and chemicals and suffer from diseases (Scientific American). Although they are called killer whales, no attack on a human by an orca has ever been recorded in the wild (Marinebio).

Killer whales are massive creatures and cannot be missed because of their distinct black body with white patches. Orcas may look the same throughout the world, but they are commonly split into three types based on their markings and behavior. The three most common types are the "residents", "transients", and the "offshore" orcas. The "resident" orca is most commonly seen in the northeast Pacific. These orcas behave as one, in one pod which is complex and family oriented. They feast mainly on fish and sometimes squid. The "transients" travel in small pods which are often unorganized. These orcas roam close to the shore, but do not stick to one place for hunting or socializing. They mainly eat a

diet of other marine mammals. "Offshore" orcas only hunt off shore, hence the term "offshore orcas". They eat little fish, but have scarred fins on their bodies, which resembles their hunting style.

Sadly, killer whales are mistreated throughout the oceans, from being hunted for their oils to what others consider simple fun just to kill. Whaling has increased over the years, which has put more whales at risk. They were added to the endangered species list in 2006. Though hunting an endangered species is illegal, Japanese whalers are consistently hunting and murdering the killer whales. Whalers sell their oils on the black market for prices as high as \$20.00 per barrel. Illegal hunting of whales is most common in the northern part of the Pacific Ocean, but is not uncommon in any other oceans.

Though whaling is a major blow to the numbers of killer whales, there is also another silent killer, captivity. In captivity, killer whales only live eight years on average. In the wild, the life expectancy for females is fifty years and for males, thirty. Captivity has decreased the life expectancy of whales and also creates a claustrophobic environment for them. The average tank for an orca is twelve feet deep and forty-eight feet wide, which is twice the length of the whale. This size is required by law in the United States for building an orca tank, but tanks in other countries, such as Switzerland, are almost three times the size of U.S. regulations. With the smaller size, orcas feel trapped, as they are used to swimming hundreds of miles a day in thousands of miles of open-ocean.

Though captivity has an effect on the lifespan on orcas, it also has a toll on the emotional well-being of orcas. Since orcas are confined to such a small space, they are placed into an environment they would not normally be in. Orcas become visibly depressed by curling their dorsal fin and banging their bodies against the glass of the tank. The dorsal fin of an orca, whether male or female, naturally sticks straight up. In captivity, however, it is commonly noticed that this dorsal fin is curled or bent over to one side. When an orca is depressed, they slow mentally and physically, causing them to become lethargic. Though tricks and swimming keep them active, when they are separated from their pod, they start to shut down. As a result of this depression, their fin curls. Banging their bodies against the tank is an act of

defiance, but also desperation. By constantly throwing their five ton bodies against this glass, they are also harming their internal organs. Sometimes, the physical damage of the collisions results in a tragic death for the orca. Wanda, the first captured orca to be placed into a whale exhibit, was placed in her tank and repeatedly crashed into the walls, resulting in her death the next day. She was one of the many whales whose desperation led to her death in 1961. Many whales have been captured since then, taken away to a small, claustrophobic tank, and ripped away from their families, resulting in depression and possibly, death.

Fortunately, there is hope for this precious species. Many programs are available around the world that support whale preservation, but one organization sticks out impeccably. The Whale Museum in San Juan Island of Washington State perfectly identifies what orca preservation is all about. The goal of this organization is to increase the number of orcas and monitor their positions while migrating to make sure that they are in no harm. The Whale Museum offers many programs to create a healthy environment for these whales and also watches their behavior while collecting data for research. One such program that supports preservation is their “Adopt a Whale” program. This program gives whale lovers the opportunity to adopt their own whale for a small annual contribution. The money gathered from the adoptions supports the museum’s research as well as the safety of these creatures. By observing whale behavior, the researchers gather information about their performance and their interaction with other pod members. The Whale Museum helps to maintain the well-being of whales, along with keeping them safe from harm.

There are many things orca-lovers can do to support the preservation and research of these mammals. Supporting anti-whaling organizations is important to help preserve the life span and numbers of whales. The Whale Museum and other anti-whaling organizations are great ways to get involved to help in research and education against whaling. By supporting these organizations, we can help take a stand against whaling so orcas will and no longer be an endangered species. Other ways to

help the orcas from extinction is through awareness. It is important to educate marine biologists so they can stay on top of the issues that hurt endangered mammals. Marine biologists are studying ways to learn more about their food sources and lack of prey. Orcas eat Chinook salmon, but salmon are also threatened in the oceans. As a result, there may not be enough salmon to support growth in the killer whale population (NOAA). Furthermore, it is also imperative that young students learn about the environment and how their actions connect to the ecosystems. Students must learn ways to make the waters safe for marine life and free from pollution. Another way to create awareness is to start a Facebook page or make a You Tube video that casts a light on endangered species. As young people, we can also write to our legislatures about our concerns to let them know that saving endangered animals is important to everyone. This past May 2013, was the 40th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act. Congress passed the Act in 1973 over concerns that many species of plants and animals were in danger of becoming extinct. It is important to keep in mind that “if you look at one species disappearing, it’s not just one species disappearing it’s actually all the interactions that relate to it” (The Whale Museum).

The *Orcinus Orca* is one of the misjudged and misunderstood creatures in marine history. The fact that they are endangered makes them even more precious to humankind. There are many educational organizations whose goal is to prevent whaling and preserve these amazing creatures from possible extinction. There are many anti-whaling organizations committed to preserving the quality of life for these endangered mammals. This magnificent creature has a chance of defying the odds and surviving. The orca whales need immediate help from people and organizations who can help and protect them, from us.

Citations

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