

## Exposing SeaWorld – The Fate of Captive Orcas

The audience cheers as orcas wave their pectoral fins to the crowd, the smell of buttery popcorn fills the stadium, and the sun glimmers on the water's surface. Yet, behind the scenes of SeaWorld's Orca Encounter is a darker reality. The parks' killer whales are cramped in chlorinated tanks, starved for failing to perform well, and deprived of the ability to engage in natural behavior (Biancolin). Unaware of the orcas' miserable situation, millions of people flock to SeaWorld each year to be amazed by their awe-inspiring choreographed routines. Blinded by greed, SeaWorld imprisons and manipulates their orcas at the expense of the animals' physical and psychological health.

As one of the world's most powerful predators and majestic sea creatures, killer whales are complex animals ("Orca"). Known as the largest member of the dolphin family, these marine mammals can be found in every ocean around the world ("Orca"). With their outstanding hunting techniques, tremendous physical power, and superior intelligence, orcas are apex predators (Bradford). In fact, these killer whales have large, complex brains with an extra lobe of tissue, the paralimbic lobe, that even humans do not possess (Kachar, et al.). Researchers have found that this lobe allows orcas to "experience feelings, emotions, and social connections such as love, joy, and grief on a level that human beings cannot even comprehend" (Kachar, et al.) While orcas lead carefree, natural lives in the wild, their life in captivity causes them extensive physical and psychological harm.

Although killer whales are highly social and intelligent mammals, they have a long and dark history in the marine park entertainment industry – most notably at SeaWorld. Starting in 1961, the billion-dollar orca industry began when the first whales were captured from the wild

(Williams 16). Don Goldsberry, former Director of Collection at SeaWorld, confessed to ambushing killer whales, forcing the mammals into shallow coves, and entrapping them with a net (Williams 16-17). In fact, his team shamefully admitted to splitting the whales' bellies open, filling their insides with rocks, and sinking them to the bottom of the ocean when orcas died from the stress of evading capture (Williams 17). To this day, at least 134 killer whales have been taken into captivity from the wild, and 79% of the orcas are now dead (Williams 5). Although the method for capturing orcas is horrifying, the whales' conditions worsened with captivity at SeaWorld.

While SeaWorld's Orca Encounters is advertised as "educational," the splashy and showy routines create physical problems for the orcas. First, the killer whales are subjugated to cramped, artificial enclosures – making them unable to engage in natural behaviors and exercise ("A Summary" 3). In fact, SeaWorld's largest orca tank holds 5.8 million gallons of water, roughly 0.0001% of the volume that an orca swims in the wild (Hoyt 41). While killer whales can travel over 100 miles a day in their natural habitat, they are essentially locked in concrete cages at SeaWorld (Biancolin). Additionally, orcas are stripped of their ability to communicate through echolocation since their enclosures have highly reflective walls ("A Summary" 9). Oceanographer Jean-Michel Cousteau likened orca enclosures to "a person being blindfolded in a jail cell" ("A Summary" 9).

Second, the killer whales are forced to perform for food. Eric Walters, a former trainer at Sealand (a park associated with SeaWorld), admitted that trainers frequently deprive orcas of their full food ratio of fish if they fail to perform well during a show (Williams 45). Furthermore, the fish they do receive is frozen and lacks the nutritional value necessary for healthy living and

longevity (Henn). To prevent malnutrition, SeaWorld merely feeds their killer whales supplements in the form of gelatin and vitamins (Henn). Consequently, all captive, male orcas have a collapsed dorsal fin due to their unnatural diet of thawed fish – a condition that rarely happens in the wild (Williams 51).

Finally, SeaWorld's orcas suffer damage to their teeth and skin due to their unnatural living conditions. Bored in their small environment, killer whales grind their teeth to a pulp against the concrete tanks (Jett, et al.). In order to prevent infection, trainers drill holes into their teeth - often without pain relief (Jett, et al). According to a report by John Jett, 70% of orcas in captivity have damaged teeth. Additionally, these same shallow tanks cause the orcas to become sunburned (Cronin). Although wild orcas can dive as deep as 850 feet to escape from the sun's rays, the deepest tanks at SeaWorld are only 40 feet deep (Cronin). Without shade from the hot, blistering sun, trainers must apply black zinc oxide to hide the orcas' peeling skin from cheering crowds (Cronin). As one can see, SeaWorld's captive orcas face extensive physical harm; in turn, these physical issues directly cause them psychological damage.

By depriving captive orcas of the ability to engage in natural behavior, SeaWorld creates a stressful environment for these creatures. Since killer whales live in tightly-knit family pods, taking them from the wild creates severe emotional distress and psychological dysfunction (Warley). Additionally, orcas born in captivity are regularly transferred between parks nationwide to “balance” the genetic breeding pool – creating even more distress for the animals (“A Summary” 67). Whale researcher, Erich Hoyt, reports that stress is a contributing factor to as many as 50% of captive killer whales' deaths (50).

Since SeaWorld creates a stressful environment for the killer whales, the park induces orca hostility. In fact, ex-SeaWorld trainer Jeffrey Ventre shared that “hard to control” orcas are given Valium to calm their aggression (Gilbody-Dickerson). Nonetheless, severe stress paired with aggression, often causes killer whales to harm themselves (Williams 43). In SeaWorld, Texas, for example, an orca named Kahana committed suicide by forcefully colliding into the walls of her concrete tank; she suffered multiple cerebral contusions, hemorrhaging, and skull fractures (Williams 44). Four years later at that same park, visitors watched in horror as an orca named Keet repeatably body slammed himself into the walls of his tank (Williams 44). In addition to hurting themselves, there are over 600 pages of documented instances in which the killer whales have harmed SeaWorld trainers (“A Summary” 10).

By exploiting and harming orcas, SeaWorld also hurts its employees. A common myth is that SeaWorld trainers are marine professionals, and they understand the dangers of working with orcas. In reality, the “trainers” are merely performers without any formal marine biology background (Biancolin). Consequently, they are often the ones who suffer from the orcas’ aggression. In 1991, the first reported incident occurred when Keltie Byrnes, a trainer at Sealand (a park associated with SeaWorld), slipped and fell into the orca tank after a show (Kindon). Three frustrated orcas quickly attacked Byrnes and drowned her to death (Williams 2). Soon after the incident, Sealand closed and sold one of the killer whales involved, Tilikum, to SeaWorld, Orland – without the new “trainers” having any knowledge of this horrid incident (Kindon). Tilikum murdered once again in 1999; reports reveal that Daniel Dukes was found naked and draped upon Tilikum’s back, suffering serious wounds and bites after he evaded security and tried to stay overnight at the park (Williams 45). More than two decades later, Tilikum murdered yet a third victim. During a “Dine with Shamu” show in 2010, visitors

watched as Tilikum pulled trainer Dawn Brancheau's arm into the water and drowned her – severing her spine and tearing off her scalp in the process (Lavender and Holland). Afterward, Tilikum was held in an enclosure so small that his nose and tail could touch the sides of the tank, which further induced stress and psychological dysfunction (“A Summary” 6). Rather than address Tilikum's aggression and stop these senseless murders, SeaWorld continued to use him to breed every orca born into captivity (Newkirk).

At first look, SeaWorld's orca shows seem exciting for visitors and animals alike. With the release of a documentary that brought to light the horrors of orca captivity, however, *Blackfish* turned public opinion into public action. After its release, SeaWorld's profits plummeted 84%, the park saw a decrease of 100,000 visitors in the second quarter of the season, and SeaWorld lost sponsors such as the NFL's Miami Dolphins and Mattel (Rhodan; “How Many”). With stocks plummeting in 2019, public scrutiny coerced SeaWorld to stop the orca breeding program. Nonetheless, the remaining whales are forced to live out their lives in deplorable conditions unfit for these incredible creatures. Every audience member who sits in SeaWorld's stadium is fed the lie that each ticket, each visit, and each experience directly funds wildlife “rescues,” “rehabilitations,” and “habitat protections.” However, the sad truth is that SeaWorld is directly responsible for the inhumane treatment and captivity of these animals. By spending money to support SeaWorld, you are promoting the abuse and imprisonment of these majestic creatures. However, you can stop SeaWorld's physical and psychological harm to the orcas by educating others and creating awareness. Only then, will the stadiums be empty – leaving no crowds to cheer on the killer whales.

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Natalia Celis  
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