

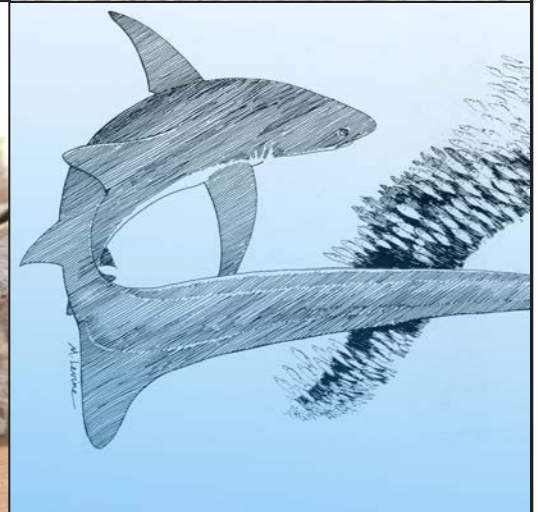
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W I L D L I F E A N D T H E E N V I R O N M E N T



Tilikum performing during a show at SeaWorld Orlando.

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THE WHALE SANCTUARY PROJECT TURNING THE TIDE FOR CAPTIVE WHALES

by **Lori Marino, Ph.D.**
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In 2010, a horrified world heard the news that a 12,500-pound male orca named Tilikum had killed trainer Dawn Brancheau during a show at SeaWorld Orlando. Like everyone else, I was heartbroken for the loss of Dawn's life but also because I knew that for Tilikum to commit such an extreme violent act he must have been driven to the limits of his ability to cope with years of captivity. He snapped.

Those of us who study the wellbeing of captive orcas and other cetaceans (dolphins, whales and porpoises) know two important truths: First, orca attacks on humans in captivity are frequent and Tilikum's actions were not unforeseen (he was involved in two other human deaths at other facilities before coming to SeaWorld Orlando). Second, there is not a single confirmed case of a free-ranging orca deliberately harming, let alone killing, a human being. Given this fact, Tilikum's actions were desperate – a consequence of the psychological pressures of being on display in a concrete tank.

Tilikum (who died in 2017 at the age of 35) was sending a strong message about life "in the tanks," one we've been ignoring for decades since we started capturing and forcing orcas into concrete tanks at entertainment parks in 1961. For a while, the frequent deaths in the tanks were seen as a failure of animal husbandry and veterinary care. In the early days it was hoped that with increasing knowledge

about these whales, captive facilities would eventually "get it right." And while there was some improvement in survivorship of orcas taken into captivity over the first couple of decades, that same metric has been at a standstill for the past few recent decades. The scientific evidence of poor welfare, short lifespans, and psychological and physical ailments continues to pile up, all pointing to the same conclusion: that the nature of orcas and other cetaceans is entirely incompatible with life in the tanks.

Captivity by the Numbers

There are more than 3,000 whales, dolphins and porpoises, representing about ten species and hybrids, held in captivity around the world. In North America, there are 480 bottlenose dolphins, 80 beluga whales, 24 orcas and other species in marine parks and sea pens. And there are currently 60 orcas held in captivity (27 wild-captured plus 33 captive-born) in at least 14 marine parks in 8 countries. SeaWorld holds 22 of them.

In Marineland of Canada in Ontario, close to 50 beluga whales are confined to a few cramped tanks while a lone orca, Kiska, endlessly circles her tank next to them in complete isolation. She was captured from her family in Iceland at the age of three and has spent 38 years in captivity. Kiska has lost all five of her children to the tanks.

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LEFT: Lolita (aka Tokitae), performs for the public every day at Miami Seaquarium in Florida in one of the smallest cetacean tanks in the world. **RIGHT:** Two orcas perform with Tilikum during a show at SeaWorld Orlando.

At Miami Seaquarium in Florida, another aging female orca, Lolita (aka Tokitae), performs for the public every day in one of the smallest cetacean tanks in the world with only two Pacific white-sided dolphins as “companions.” Now in her early 50’s, Lolita was captured in 1970 in the infamous Penn Cove, Washington roundup in Puget Sound which removed 80 whales from the Southern Resident population with as many as five orcas drowning in the nets during the process.

This same population was left dramatically weakened by the captures and is now facing possible extinction with only 75 members left due to low breeding numbers, scarcity of prey from over-fishing and dams, boat traffic and pollution. Today, Lolita’s 86-year-old mother is believed to still swim off the coast of Washington state with the remaining members of her L pod. (Orcas form pods comprised of family groups who hunt and travel together). Kiska’s and Lolita’s histories are not unique; rather, they are representative of the heavy toll life in the tanks takes.

Thriving is Impossible in the Tanks

Despite round-the-clock veterinary care, fulltime food provisioning, and lack of natural hazards, orcas and other cetaceans continue to lead short and unhealthy lives in the tanks. Long-term field studies confirm that free-ranging female orcas can live 90-100 years and on average to age 46; males can live 60-70 years and on average to age 31. Yet the “maximum” lifespan for captive orcas is about equivalent to the “average” life expectancy of free-ranging orcas. In the past six decades, no captive-born orca has surpassed 30 years of age. Indeed, only four SeaWorld orcas (all wild-caught) have achieved or surpassed 40 years of age. Over 90 percent of all female orcas at SeaWorld have died before the age of 25.

These grim statistics are due to a fundamental mismatch

between what orcas need to thrive and the life they are forced to endure in marine parks. Orcas have large and complex brains, and their social behavior includes cooperative hunting, long-term care of juveniles, traveling over 75 miles a day, often diving to depths of 100-150 meters or more, learned cultural traditions and dialects unique to each group, and community-living based on strong emotional bonds. Most notable about orcas is the intense and long mother-child bond. In some communities, males stay with their mother their entire life.

But these social and emotional needs are destroyed by life in marine parks where mothers, calves, family members and friends are regularly separated and transferred in and out of different facilities. Their sophisticated cognitive abilities and main sensory capacity – echolocation (using sonar to investigate their environment) – are stifled in the barren tanks where they are fed dead fish by trainers. Moreover, there is no space to disperse (as they would in the ocean) if they have conflicts, and so the small space leads to the kind of violent aggression that’s unknown in free-ranging populations.

The chronic stress of trying to adapt to such a barren and artificial environment leads to psychological and behavioral abnormalities that eventually wear down the whales’ immune system, resulting in increased infection rates and early death. Common behavioral problems include stereotypies – repetitive actions without purpose, e.g. endless circling of the tank, grating the teeth on tank walls and gates. The result of the latter is that 61 percent of captive orcas have dental pathology so that their teeth must be drilled out and then rinsed daily to try to prevent infection.

Nevertheless, immune system dysfunction and dental

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problems cause all kinds of infectious diseases that take the lives of captive orcas. These include pneumonia and other lung diseases, candidiasis (systemic yeast infections), skin infections, gastric ulcers, and encephalitis. Some of these diseases are found in free-ranging populations but others are unique to life in the tanks. Moreover, marine parks regularly and as a matter of course dose the whales with valium to “keep them calm” and antibiotics, which lead to antibiotic resistance and an inability to fight disease.

No Education and No Conservation

Some proponents of orca captivity suggest that the short lives of the whales at marine entertainment parks are a small price to pay for the educational and conservation value of displaying these animals as “ambassadors for their species.” Marine parks send the message to visitors that by viewing whales in tanks performing one is somehow engaging in conservation of wild whales. Moreover, they claim that visitors to these displays come away with more knowledge about the whales and more concern about conservation in general. But there is no evidence to support these claims. In fact, some recent studies show that the opposite is true. When people view wild animals in places like marine theme parks and zoos they tend to care less, not more, about protection of their wild counterparts because the parks send the implicit message that the animals are all “doing okay.”

So, with no evidence for educational or conservation benefits, coupled with the suffering these animals endure, it is difficult to justify keeping them on display in concrete tanks simply for entertainment. And the public is increasingly uncomfortable with this practice. The 2013 film *Blackfish*, which focused on Tilikum and on Dawn Brancheau’s death and exposed the brutality of SeaWorld’s practices of confining orcas, resulted in a public outcry to end the keeping of orcas at marine theme parks. That public voice is getting stronger every day as more and more people call for an end to keeping whales in concrete tanks and for a more respectful and compassionate way to treat them. That alternative is sanctuary.

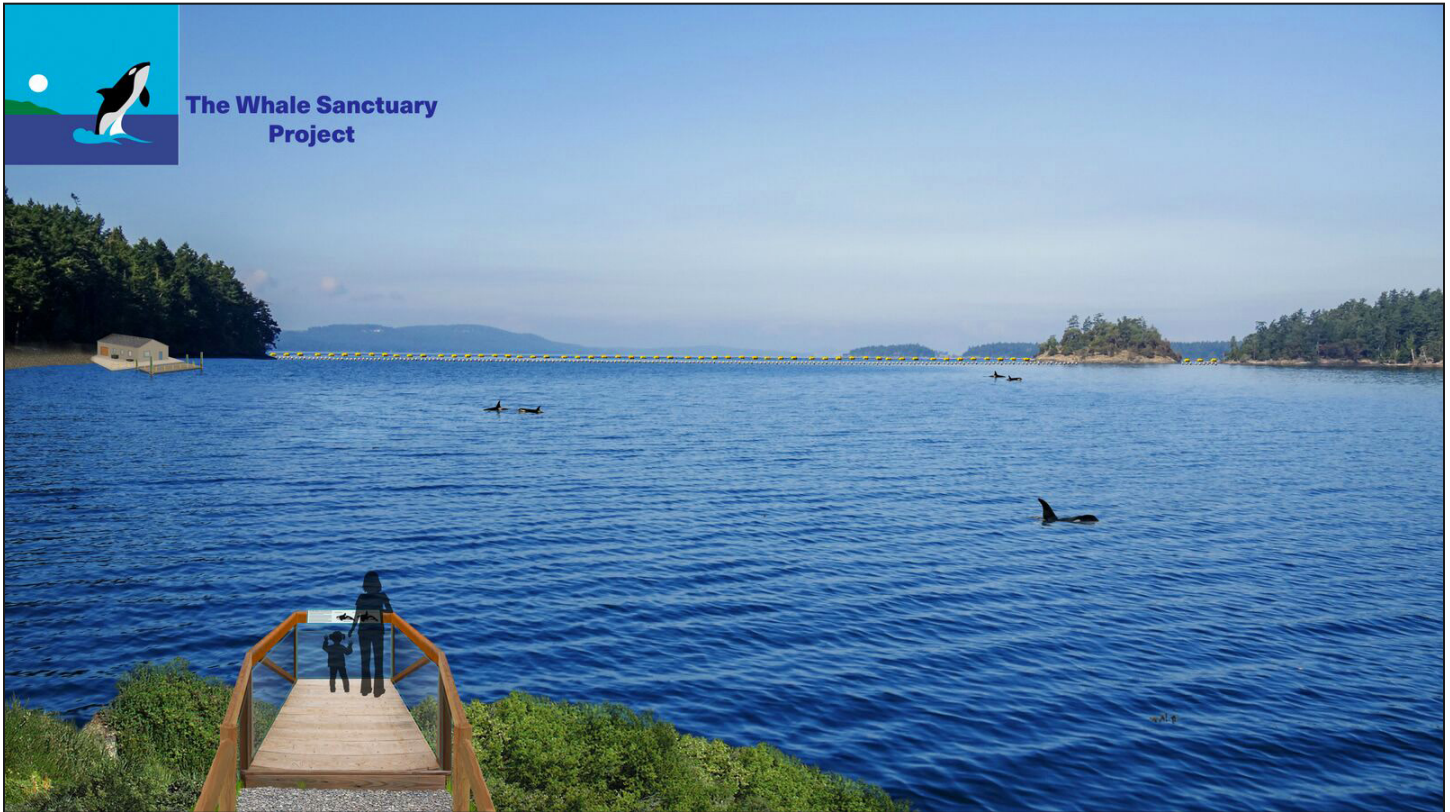
Turning the Tide

To achieve the future goal of ending the keeping of whales and dolphins on display there needs to be an intermediate step. Captive breeding must end. But even though SeaWorld has stopped breeding orcas, the remaining whales are still expected to be living in the tanks for the remainder of their lives. Instead, they need to be retired to places where they can be given back some of what was taken from them by the captive display industry. They will need to go to sanctuaries. And while there are such places for wild land animals such as elephants, lions and tigers, and great apes, there are none yet for whales and dolphins. While some would suggest that we should just release all the captive whales into the ocean, this is not realistic.



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Whale Sanctuary Project Concept Drawing.

© Picture provided by The Whale Sanctuary Project

Most of the orcas in marine parks were born in captivity and do not have any survival skills; they do not recognize live fish as food and do not have a free-ranging social group to go back to. Even those who were taken from the wild as youngsters have been in captivity for so long that it isn't clear they would be able to feed and protect themselves or be accepted by their natal group, even if it were found. Permanent seaside sanctuaries can provide an environment that is as close as possible to a natural habitat while also protecting, provisioning and caring for the residents as they recover from being exploited.

Whale Sanctuary Project

An authentic sanctuary is not just a place to live; it is a place to thrive. The wellbeing of the resident whales is the priority. The non-profit organization Whale Sanctuary Project (www.whalesanctuary.org) is working to create a permanent seaside sanctuary for retired orcas and beluga whales in an environment that is as close as possible to the natural one, and with the goal of optimizing the whales' opportunities to explore, make their own choices, play, socialize and rest, all while being fed and cared for by top veterinary professionals.

Once we procure a site on either the east or west coasts of North America, we will create a facility that will offer over 300 times the space of the largest SeaWorld tank, a natural environment to interact with, a state-of-the-art veterinary

facility for 24/7 care, and the opportunity for the whales, some for the first time in their lives, to enjoy autonomy. There will be no performances and no reproduction. Visitors will be able to see them from a distant viewing point and to learn about whales and the oceans through educational programs, interactive displays at an interpretive center, and audio-visual feeds that will open a window into the world of the resident whales for anyone with internet access.

Successful authentic sanctuaries like these are places where traumatized animals can blossom and enjoy their life for the first time. And while whales should never be placed into captivity in the first place, seaside sanctuaries are the way for those currently in the tanks to enjoy a better future.

MORE ABOUT THE WHALE SANCTUARY PROJECT

The first organization focused solely on creating seaside sanctuaries in North America for orcas and beluga whales who are being retired from entertainment facilities or have been rescued from the ocean and need rehabilitation or permanent care. While there has been a change in public attitudes toward keeping these intelligent and socially complex animals in concrete tanks for the purposes of entertainment, there is still no possibility of retiring them as they cannot simply be released into the ocean. Seaside sanctuaries will change that by providing a place for them to live out their lives.

For more information: www.whalesanctuary.org