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Claims and Realities About Cetacean Sanctuaries

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Thousands of cetaceans live in marine parks and other facilities around the world. Yet their well-being in captivity is problematic (Lott and Williamson 2017; Marino and White 2022; Marino et al., 2020), and a large part of the public in the West has turned against keeping cetaceans on display (Rose, Soller, and Parsons 2023; Mountain 2019). The response to these issues must come in the form of practical actions that represent a permanent and pervasive change. Sanctuaries for other large wild animals, e.g., elephants, great apes, etc., are models of how to enact this moral shift for cetaceans. Flourishing for a member of any species requires an environment that allows for the expression of both physical and psychological capacities (Marino and White 2022). A sanctuary is a place of refuge and protection but also restoration, returning the animal to the closest approximation to a natural life.

The signature characteristics of an authentic sanctuary are place, principles and practices that prioritize the well-being of each sanctuary resident over human interests. In marine parks and aquariums (i.e., display facilities), the physical environment is designed to maximize viewing of the animals (Couquiaud 2005). Authentic sanctuaries provide expansive space in a natural ocean environment to allow a wide range of natural behaviors that include seeking privacy away from the viewer's gaze. Many marine parks involve cetacean performances and/or close physical contact with visitors (in petting pools, swim-with sessions, etc.) (Stewart and Marino 2009). Authentic sanctuaries promote respect for autonomy, not requiring any trained behaviors beyond what is necessary for the residents' health and well-being and allowing only nonintrusive views of the animals (e.g., from a distance or through underwater cameras).

Authentic sanctuaries work toward a future devoid of the need for sanctuaries for captive animals (by preventing reproduction but not necessarily sexual behavior). Sanctuaries are still part of the captivity spectrum but are distinguished from marine parks by their sole mandate: to restore as much of a natural life to its residents as possible. Many in the captive cetacean industry are wary of sanctuaries for several broad reasons: for example, that they require site choice and management, animal care and funding. (These arguments, of course, pertain equally to entertainment parks.)

Those who want to maintain the status quo of confining cetaceans to tanks for entertainment promote numerous misconceptions about sanctuaries. Here are some of the most common claims made by the entertainment park industry:

Pro-marine park claim: Sanctuaries are places where the animals are “left to their own devices” without the kind of specialized care offered in marine parks and zoos.

Reality: Authentic sanctuaries offer the same level of human care as the best marine parks. They have full-service veterinary and husbandry staff with no less experience than those who work in marine parks and zoos. In fact, the care staff in a sanctuary often come from marine parks and other display facilities. Moreover, in terms of the development of veterinary practice, sanctuaries are places where students and veterinary interns hone their skills in a more natural setting. In short, entertainment parks are not the only places that provide high-quality animal care.

Pro-marine park claim: There is no or very little standardization for what the “sanctuary” means in terms of physical space or welfare.

Reality: Accreditation criteria for cetacean sanctuaries have now been adopted by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries ([GFAS-Cetacean-Standards-2023.pdf \(whalesanctuaryproject.org\)](https://whalesanctuaryproject.org/GFAS-Cetacean-Standards-2023.pdf)). This document is based on more relevant and, in many ways, stricter criteria for well-being than currently exist in the standards for the marine park industry that have been established by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

Pro-marine park claim: Seaside sanctuaries are inherently too dangerous for captive cetaceans and there is a high risk of disease transmission and environmental catastrophes impacting the whales.

Reality: As part of any site permitting process, sanctuaries must go through a rigorous scientific and environmental analysis that safeguards against unforeseen and unmitigable health risks to sanctuary residents as well as free-ranging animals near the sanctuary.

Pro-marine park claim: Aquariums and marine parks play an important role in conservation. (The implication is that authentic sanctuaries cannot because they do not allow breeding.)

Reality: The overwhelming majority of marine mammal species currently being bred in captivity are neither threatened nor endangered. Moreover, little attention is paid to maintaining genetic lineages when allowing breeding, i.e., many captive dolphins and whales are hybrids with no conservation value (Rose, Soller, Parsons 2023). The reality behind the conservation argument is that almost all breeding efforts in captive facilities are implemented to maintain captive “collections”. Sanctuaries can also play an important role in conservation by providing rehabilitation and release to free-ranging cetaceans who are injured or in need of medical attention. Free-ranging cetaceans would likely find it less stressful to be treated and released from an ocean environment than to be transported to a tank, from which they often do not return.

Pro-marine park claim: Marine parks serve an educational purpose. (The implication here, too, is that authentic sanctuaries cannot.)

Reality: Marine parks did serve an educational purpose in the past by introducing the public to animals who were unfamiliar to them. But new concerns have emerged that marine parks (and zoos) promote objectification and domination over other animals (Jamieson 2012; Malamud 2017). Moreover, robust support for the educational value of viewing captive animals in zoos and marine parks has been elusive (Marino et al. 2010; Mellish et al. 2019; Nygren and Ojalampi 2018). Sanctuaries, by contrast, serve a legitimate education purpose by being

entirely transparent about the lived experiences and histories of its residents and why it is important for them to live in a more natural environment.

Conclusion: In summary, sanctuaries represent the next evolution in how we relate to cetaceans, just as they do for all other animals. Some, such as the Whale Sanctuary Project and the National Aquarium's Dolphin Sanctuary, are already well into development, and the Sea Life Trust Beluga Whale Sanctuary in Iceland is close to completion (Groves 2020). There are also similar projects in Europe and Australia with the aim of creating sanctuaries for cetaceans (Dolphinaria-Free Europe 2017). These efforts are part of a global movement to replace marine parks and aquariums as places for all but a few captive cetaceans.

The marine park industry has an important role to play in this societal shift by agreeing to end breeding for all captive species and to work together with others to create authentic sanctuaries for cetaceans. We have the ability and the moral responsibility to do just that.

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