



Report on Orca Welfare at Loro Parque: Past and Present

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Loro Parque (LP), a zoo located in the Canary Islands, Spain, includes a captive orca facility called Orca Ocean that has held orcas since 2006. Unfortunately, LP has a poor record of welfare and safety for both orcas and human trainers. The history of orcas at LP is one characterized by poor management and husbandry decisions, lack of transparency, imprudent practices regarding orca breeding and infant care, and an overall inability to provide enough space or enrichment for adequate orca welfare.

Poor husbandry practices

LP has been plagued with multiple problems due to poor husbandry. Since 2021 four orcas have died there: Ula (age 3), Skyla (age 17), Kohana (age 20), and Keto (age 29) – three in young adulthood and one a juvenile. Another calf, Vicky, died at age 10 months in 2013¹. All except one of the orcas died well before the average lifespan in the wild and Keto barely reached that milestone when he passed on. None lived to even close to the natural maximum lifespan.

Ula (born to Morgan and Keto) had to be bottle-fed and was covered in lesions, with discolored skin and a deformed melon². She died of intestinal torsion. Skyla died suddenly from blood poisoning resulting from twisted intestines³, Kohana of a cardiac malformation⁴, and Keto from, as of yet, unknown circumstances. Keto's teeth were worn down from chewing on the sides of the pool and he regularly ingested pieces of Metflex, a substance used to waterproof the tanks at Orca Ocean at LP⁵. The calf Vicky died from LP mishandling her bottle feeding possibly giving her too much formula at once⁶.

Every single calf born at Loro Parque has been bottle-raised by humans. This is a dismal record and demonstrates that LP does not have the expertise or the ability to provide an environment in which orcas can successfully care for their young and, furthermore, that they engage in practices that are harmful to the health and development of orca juveniles.

LP currently holds three young orcas – Tekoa (age 24), Morgan (age 17), and Adan (age 13). Tekoa has been the brunt of much aggression from other whales at LP for many years and was involved in an incident in which he attacked a trainer (see below). He has hauled himself out onto the stage, apparently to get away from aggressions⁷.

Morgan's story is complex and fraught. She was captured in the waters off Norway because she was alone and in apparent need of nutrition and hydration. She was housed at Dolfinarium Harderwijk and transferred to LP in 2011. In 2016 two videos surfaced that showed Morgan beaching herself on the stadium's stage for a prolonged time and rapidly banging herself on the tank gates⁸. Morgan was separated from her calf Ula for several months because she was unable to provide enough milk⁹.

One of the main welfare problems observed in captive orcas is a specific stereotypic behavior of grating the teeth against hard surfaces in the tank. This behavior results in tooth damage and, in some cases, systemic illness if the teeth are not bored out and regularly flushed¹⁰. It is important to note that because of the way food is fed to captive orcas there is no source of tooth wear other than grating the teeth on hard surfaces.

The teeth of six orcas at Loro Parque were assessed and all six were found to have dental damage. For example, the youngest orca at LP demonstrated the second highest raw pathology index at that facility and was observed to have eight of 19 (42%) mandibular teeth bored, seven teeth (37%) with coronal wear scored as extreme and seven worn at or below the gum line¹⁰. These findings indicate that all of the orcas at LP engaged in stress-related self-harm with significant potential for systemic disease.

Lack of transparency about incidents

In 2009 Alexis Martinez, a young trainer at LP, was fatally attacked by Keto during rehearsal for a production that was both rushed and lacked adequate preparation. The park initially characterized the death as an "accident" and claimed that the body showed no signs of violence, but the subsequent autopsy report stated that Martinez sustained grave injuries during the attack, including multiple compression fractures, tears to vital organs, and bite marks on his body¹¹.

During the local investigation into the death of Alexis Martinez it was also revealed that the park had falsely represented a 2007 incident with Tekoa, another male orca, by claiming that too was an accident rather than an attack¹². They also denied previous similar incidents with the same whale brought to light by another worker at LP. In fact, while performing a specific behavior called a "foot-push" Tekoa dragged the trainer to the bottom of the pool and back up to the surface several times. The trainer, who suffered a broken arm and injured right lung, had to be retrieved from the pool by two other trainers¹².

When Morgan's calf Ula was sick LP also denied her condition and claimed she was in perfect health. They were vague about the cause of death when she passed away¹³.

These incidents not only demonstrate that there is reason to be concerned about how LP conducts its work with orcas and trainers but that they are not transparent about incidents at the park.

Orca breeding

LP has a record of inappropriate breeding practices with orcas. Inbreeding (uncle with niece) has occurred in two of the three calves born at Loro Parque¹. In the wild, 77% of female orcas produce their first surviving calf between the ages of 11 and 17, with a very few as early as 9 and as late as 21 years of age¹⁴. And typically, intercalf intervals in the wild are 3-7 years, which gives the mother a chance to raise and nurture her calf before having another one¹⁴. At LP, one of the females gave birth when she was under 8.5 years of age and was quickly impregnated again just 4.5 months after she gave birth. The female rejected both calves and they had to be separated from her and bottle-fed.

Inability to provide adequate space or enrichment

The tanks at LP are barren, small, and crowded. They are so crowded that orca Morgan has at least twice jumped out of the water and beached herself on the concrete because of extensive bullying in the tanks due to the lack of space. Their largest tank is 55m at its longest (15m less than the largest orca tank) and it is only 12m deep. These space limitations are also brought into focus in comparison to the fact that free-ranging orcas often travel tens of km a day in a straight line¹⁵ and can dive up to 750 m¹⁶. The lack of adequate space at LP is likely to be one of the major sources of stress leading to beaching, aggression, and disease in the orcas they hold¹⁶.

Conclusions

There is substantial growing empirical evidence that – just generally - living in concrete tanks in performance parks is stressful and harmful for orcas¹⁶. LP appears to be an extreme example of that issue – with a track record of early deaths, mishandling of breeding and calf development, self-harming stereotypies, and hyperaggression. Moreover, they are not forthcoming and transparent when problems arise – even as extreme as the killing of a trainer by one of the whales. All of this evidence converges on the conclusion that LP is not a safe, healthful facility for orcas, and it is not recommended that they be allowed to take more orcas.

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