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Free Willy?

The changing face of
killer whale captivity

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Captive killers

The truth about killer whale captivity

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Those who grew up in Vancouver likely had their first killer whale experience as children: pressed up to the glass window of a tank in Stanley Park, watching the massive black and white creature swam around. Breathless in awe that something so big, something so beautiful could be so close, they may have tapped the glass in hopes of connecting to the whale. But does the killer whale belong in there? Does a large, intelligent, echolocating predator of the sea — an alien world to us — belong in what is essentially a swimming pool, just because we want to bring them into our own world of land?

Vancouver Aquarium's killer whales were all captured in the wild as young whales. The last two killer whales, Bjossa and Finna, were from Iceland. Though the experience of seeing a killer whale through the glass was no doubt exhilarating in some way, for some there is a lingering thought: is it right for these creatures to swim around and around in a tank all day, in a foreign environment? Is this really the only way to bring them into our world?

We know killer whales for their distinct black and white pattern, their grace, their perceived intelligence, and the circus tricks they are put through. Aquariums and marine parks have kept killer whales now for nearly 50 years. Supporters of aquaria affirm that the practice of keeping killer whales captive is essential to conservation, research, and public education. At the same time, many people — from animal activists to wild orca researchers — question the ethics, safety and overall vitality of the captive industry.

The captive orca industry began not far from here, off the coasts of B.C. and Washington. In 1964, the Vancouver Aquarium harpooned a killer whale with the intention of using it as a model for a sculpture. But the whale didn't die from the harpoon and was eventually towed to a pen at the Burrard Drydock where the orca was exhibited until he died 87 days later. The next year, Ted Griffen of the Seattle Aquarium captured a calf that had gotten tangled up in fishing nets and named him Namu. During these early years of orca captivity, people discovered that the animals were not threatening, and did need to be shot on the spot or feared; rather, they were playful, gentle, and smart creatures. This,

in combination with their iconic colouring, made the public fall in love with the lure of the killer whale. And so, the orca display industry began.

In 1976, Washington State — where many of these orcas have been captured — banned live captures, due to their effect on the already small orca population. Although British Columbia didn't ban live captures until 1990, they effectively ended after 1976. After wild orca captures ended off the Pacific coast, Iceland became the

sympathized with it. Since then, the Vancouver Aquarium continues to research orcas in the wild, and still has captive beluga whales and pacific white-sided dolphins.

With live captures banned in most parts of the world, and highly frowned upon in others, nearly all new captive killer whales are now bred in captivity. Captive killer whales come from different origins, whether it be Icelandic, Pacific and Resident (fish-eating), or Transient (mammal-

closed shortly after). Whether these attacks were the result of curiosity, menace, instinct, or a combination, we may never know. Although Tilikum was captured in the wild, aggressive incidents are not limited to wild-born killer whales. Keto is a captive-born killer whale on loan to Loro Parque, a marine park in the Canary Islands along with several other young SeaWorld whales. On Dec. 24, 2009 Keto rammed his trainer, Alexis Martinez to death underwater. Unlike Tilikum, who is known to be dangerous due to past history, Keto was cleared to be safe enough to work with in the water and as a captive-born whale, never hunted, saw killer whales hunting or was taught to hunt. The tank is all Keto knows and will ever know.

Captive killer whales live in highly unnatural settings. Any enclosure would be comparably small for an ocean creature, and furthermore, orcas rely on sound; the echolocation that they naturally use in hunt and exploration doesn't work so well when surrounded by concrete walls. It is very difficult to know if a killer whale's habitat can be even marginally simulated in captivity. Although it differs population by population and type by type, resident killer whales live in kin-based family groups for life. But in captivity, killer whales from completely different pods, types, and populations are often grouped together, and may not even understand each other due to different dialects. SeaWorld in particular constantly moves their whales around its parks and often breeds killer whales at younger ages than they normally would in the wild.

While some research can only be conducted on captive orcas, very few are used for research purposes. Besides, it is difficult to know if captive killer whales are truly representative of their species. Most facilities that house captive cetaceans claim that it helps public education and thus appreciation and conservation for these animals in the wild. But is this the only way to inspire awe towards nature? Though most aquariums have educational value, many marine parks do not. In the book *Death at SeaWorld*, a panel consisting of whale biologists and other scientists found that SeaWorld's educational material was incomplete and inaccurate. SeaWorld's shows, such as The Shamu Experience, Believe,

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place to capture killer whales. However, that too eventually came to an end at the close of the 1980s.

Those who grew up in Vancouver in the 90s will probably remember Bjossa and Finna, the last orcas to live at the Vancouver Aquarium. Finna died in 1997, leaving Bjossa alone. In April 2001, Bjossa was sent to SeaWorld San Diego, where she died that October. After Bjossa, the Vancouver Aquarium stopped displaying killer whales, due to public pressure and the difficulty in obtaining them. To many in Vancouver, this was bittersweet. Killer whales in Stanley Park had become an institution, yet there was an acceptance that Bjossa would be in a place that was just slightly less foreign for her — where there were more of her kind. As humans, we understood the need for company and

eating in the wild). These types and groups never interact in the wild yet in captivity, there are killer whales bred from these different groups, creating hybrid whales that cannot naturally belong anywhere except a tank. With Tilikum as SeaWorld's main sire (13 out of 19 captive killer whales owned by SeaWorld are related to Tilikum, according to the blog *The Orca Project*) and a limited genetic pool of captive killer whales worldwide, there is also a strong potential for widespread inbreeding in the near-future, if it hasn't happened already.

Tilikum is more infamous for being a literal killer whale. On Feb. 24, 2010 he killed his trainer, Dawn Brancheau by grabbing and drowning her. This was not the first time, either: Tilikum was also involved in the 1994 drowning of Keltie Byrne at the Sealand of Pacific in Victoria, B.C. (which

1976 the year that Washington State banned live captures

1990 the year that B.C. banned live captures

68 The number of recorded whales that had been taken or killed during the capture process from Washington and B.C.

2 Number of those whales that are still alive to this day

44 Number of known killer whales living in captivity (mostly in the United States)



and the current One Ocean, are productions that focus on entertainment, spectacle, and human emotion, rather than on education. While it may emphasize a bond between humans and whales, it neither reflects nor helps whales in the wild at all. Although some aquariums may do a bit better in terms of education and showcasing natural behaviours, most marine park shows are essentially aquatic circuses.

Within the last few decades, many of the killer whales that have captured our imagination have captured it not because we saw them swimming in a tank, but because they were free. Keiko, the whale that played Willy in *Free Willy*, was eventually released into Icelandic waters and lived semi-independently until he died in 2003. In 2002 the young, misplaced lone calf Springer also captured the public's imagination with the idea of rescuing and reuniting her to family and keeping her "free" and wild. She was successfully relocated from Puget Sound and reunited with her pod. Meanwhile, at around the same time, there was another young, misplaced lone calf, known as Luna. Luna died in 2006 in a deadly encounter with a tugboat. While Luna's story didn't have the same happy ending as Springer's, he also inspired people to think and care about killer whales, despite never having lived in a tank. For both Springer and Luna, captivity was considered unjust, reflecting the changing public attitudes towards captive killer whales. Now killer whales were no longer merely a circus animal — they belonged in the ocean.

It may be easy to say "free the whales," but as Keiko has demonstrated, things aren't so simple, and it doesn't necessarily have a storybook ending. The wild isn't a blissful or safe place, either. Yes, in some

respects the tank is safer. But releasing captive killer whales requires a lot of time and money for something that doesn't guarantee safety. As it stands, many captive whales are not fit for release for medical reasons. Some of them have missing teeth (or in some cases, almost no teeth) and need to have their mouths flushed daily to prevent infection. Oftentimes, their teeth have had to be drilled as a result of gnawing on gates, threatening other whales, or other reasons.

Since setting all whales free is neither realistic nor entirely humane, many anti-captivity groups have clamoured for performing animals to be retired into large sea pens with the possibility of venturing out, much like Keiko. Many working animals are retired after a good life's service of work, such as retired horses living out their days in fields, or retired circus and zoo elephants that go on to live in elephant sanctuaries. Despite being far from the native habitat, these sanctuaries offer relative free-roaming in a large area and the opportunity for more natural social groups. Of course, the aquaria industry does not support retirement. There are groups, including OrcaLab, a wild orca research centre, that call for the retirement of Lolita into a Sea Pen in her native waters. At over 40 years old, Lolita is the second oldest killer whale in captivity and is the last surviving whale captured from the currently endangered Washington State area. However, for killer whales, along with other whales and dolphins, the retirement concept is just that: purely conceptual.

With Bjossa long gone and only one killer whale (Kiska) remaining in Ontario's Marineland Canada, it is likely that the era of the captive killer whale will be

phased out in Canada soon; the Vancouver Aquarium and Marineland Canada still house other species of captive dolphins and whales, however. The number of captive killer whales worldwide is limited and, short of capturing more from the wild, it is possible that captive displays may not have a future.

Regardless of what happens, the concept of captive orcas is not going away immediately. The root of the problem is the attitude towards captive orcas as assets; simply a way to make money. Facilities that house them should focus less on entertainment, and more on education and research. At the same time, they should be offered a life as natural as possible, with minimal social changes and, if possible, tanks that reflect their natural habitat. An even better option for keeping killer whales would be a semi-wild setting in sea pens. Formerly captive and captive-bred whales could come and go as they please, and still maintain association with humans if they wish. This way, visitors could also have a "guaranteed" whale watching experience, much like in an aquarium, but in a more natural habitat.

Gone would be the days when you could walk up to window, watch a massive black and white killer whale swim by you, and catch a glimpse into their world. But it's not their world, it's ours. With technology rapidly progressing, maybe we'll one day find a way to bring ourselves into their world without interfering with them. Killer whales are the experts of their ocean habitat, their pods' culture, their way of life. It seems at once so alien and yet so familiar to us humans — kinship, dialect, unique rituals, violence and gentleness; yet there is so much that we still don't know. **P**

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