

The Dark, Hidden Truths of These Popular Shows

Corporations keep these animals for human entertainment and their own financial gain, yet the suffering these incredible animals must endure far exceeds your price of admission. You'll never view these popular attractions the same way again after you discover their dark, hidden truths.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The practice of keeping killer whales in captivity persists despite a growing body of evidence that shows it is extremely harmful and dangerous to remove these incredible animals from their natural habitat
- Captive orcas held at parks like SeaWorld and Marineland suffer tremendous stress from forced social interactions, small enclosures, and chemically treated water
- Symptoms of that suffering include dramatically shortened lifespans, dorsal fin collapse in most of the males, reproductive and calf-raising problems in females, whale-to-whale aggression, and aggression against humans
- The film “Blackfish” exposed the truth of the wretched lives of SeaWorld’s orcas
- A former SeaWorld performer and killer whale trainer has written a book detailing the suffering of the animals and the dangers their trainers and handlers face

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published April 18, 2015.

The practice of keeping killer whales captive for use at places like SeaWorld and Marineland is often described as “controversial.”

However, the existence of a controversy usually means there are two reasonable sides to an argument. The only argument for keeping killer whales captive is financial gain. That’s hardly a defensible position when it involves destroying the lives of marine mammals for human entertainment and financial enrichment.

How Killer Whales Suffer in Captivity

A captive environment doesn’t even remotely resemble the natural habitat of orcas, and the way the animals are grouped together in captivity is also far removed from their social structure in the wild.

Captivity is additionally stressful thanks to small enclosures and chemically “enhanced” water. The result is captive killer whales that frequently self-harm or show aggression toward other animals and/or humans.

The lifespan of captive killer whales is significantly shorter than their counterparts in the wild. Many only live into their 20s, several decades short of their natural lifespan. Pneumonia is a common illness and killer among captive orcas.

Most male captive killer whales and some females have partially or completely collapsed dorsal fins. This only occurs in wild orcas as the result of serious trauma to the fin, such as being shot or colliding with a boat. The dorsal fin is held erect by collagen, which hardens as the whale matures.

There are a number of theories to explain why dorsal fin collapse occurs, all having to do with stressors related to captivity. Predictably, SeaWorld is adamant there is no connection between dorsal fin collapse and the health and well-being of killer whales.

Captive female orcas frequently give birth at a much younger age than in the wild, and have difficulty raising their calves, many of which don't survive. The first killer whale to become pregnant in captivity lost her first calf 18 days after birth. She gave birth 6 more times, but her longest surviving calf lived only 47 days.

An Icelandic female orca gave birth to a female calf in 1993 that was both mentally and physically ill. The mother actually tried to drown the calf on several occasions during shows. The baby ultimately died a few months later, and the mother died in 1996 from complications of a stillbirth.

A female orca born in captivity gave birth for the first time in 2005, but rejected her calf. The baby was moved to another facility to be hand-raised, but she died unexpectedly at 3 years of age.

Captive killer whales are also much more likely to attack humans than their wild counterparts. The attacks consist primarily of biting their trainers during feeding, ramming them in the water, and holding them under water.

SeaWorld Takes Heat for Its Treatment of Killer Whales

The film *Blackfish* drew back the curtain on SeaWorld, exposing the ugly truth behind years of slick marketing strategies that positioned the park as a sanctuary for happy, healthy marine mammals.

EcoWatch has listed *The 9 Biggest Lies SeaWorld Wants You to Believe*, which is actually borrowed from a PETA article, *9 Times SeaWorld Lied to Your Face*.

1. **Collapsed dorsal fins are normal** — All the captive male orcas at SeaWorld have a collapsed dorsal fin, and the company has said that this is a common and naturally occurring problem. But the truth is that this only rarely happens to wild orcas (only 1%), and when it does, it's a sign that they're injured or sick.
2. **SeaWorld respects the bond between a mother and child** — In the wild, orcas stay in their family pods their whole lives. The company has said that it doesn't separate mothers from their calves — but SeaWorld declares that calves are full grown at 4 years of age and moves them to a different location, away from their mothers, at this time. SeaWorld claims that this maintains a "healthy social structure," while it's actually the complete opposite of how orcas live in the wild.
3. **SeaWorld cares about a "healthy social structure"** — SeaWorld insists that it promotes healthy social structures among the orcas it holds captive. In reality, the orcas are kept close together in cramped tanks, which causes stress and anxiety, which often leads to aggression and fights. When a fight or an attack occurs in the wild, orcas are able to flee — in captivity, they have nowhere to escape to.
4. **The orcas at SeaWorld are mentally stimulated** — The orcas at SeaWorld would have to swim about 1,500 laps a day in their cramped pools to equal the approximate 100 miles they'd swim every day in their

ocean home. Their desperation and boredom lead them to display psychotic behavior such as gnawing on the concrete sides of their tanks, which breaks their teeth.

5. **SeaWorld prioritizes wildlife rescue, rehabilitation, and conservation** — SeaWorld tries very hard to appear as though it's concerned with wildlife rescue, rehabilitation, and conservation. However, over the past decade SeaWorld has contributed less than 1% of its profits to conservation efforts.
6. **Captive orcas' life spans are equivalent to those in the wild** — Granny, a wild orca who was spotted off the coast of Canada in May 2014, is 103 years old. Other wild orcas have been known to live as long as 90 years — only five of the captive orcas at SeaWorld are more than 30 years of age. Most of them die in their teens, with the median age being 9 years old, and not a single captive orca has ever died of old age.
7. **It's safe for trainers to be in the water with orcas** — An orca at SeaWorld named Tilikum was forced to perform in circus-style shows, despite having already been involved in the deaths of two people. Dawn Brancheau, a trainer at SeaWorld, became the third person to die — a death that could have been prevented — when she was killed by Tilikum on February 24, 2010.
8. **SeaWorld's stock is fine** — After Blackfish unveiled the ugly truth behind the "abusement" park, stock in the company took a huge hit, plummeting by 35%. SeaWorld also saw a 13% drop in attendance, and its market value dropped \$1.7 billion. Despite SeaWorld's claims that its attendance was down only because of bad weather and "a shift in the Easter holiday," it's clear that many people no longer want anything to do with the torture that SeaWorld calls "entertainment."
9. **Increasing the size of the tanks will make a difference** — After its stock plummeted and its attendance dropped, SeaWorld released a media statement saying that it was going to expand the orcas' tanks — despite the fact that it had yet to apply for the permits required to build the new tanks. The expansion plan, which is now expected to conclude in 2018, includes tanks with a maximum depth of 50 feet and a length of 350 feet. In the wild, orcas dive up to 1,000 feet and swim up to 100 miles a day. This expansion will affect only the paying guests — it'll make virtually no difference to the orcas who are trapped at SeaWorld. The company's plans are nothing more than an effort to distract us from something that we all know to be true: A bigger prison is still a prison.

Captivity Is Always Captivity, No Matter How Gentle the Jailer

Those are the words of John Hargrove, who performed with and trained killer whales for 14 years, mostly at SeaWorld.

Hargrove has written a book called *Beneath the Surface: Killer Whales, Seaworld and the Truth Beyond Blackfish*, in which he details being hurt on the job, watching as calves were taken from their mothers, and witnessing other stressors of captivity that SeaWorld's whales endure.

"I finally came to the realization that if I had to live their lives, it would be hell," Hargrove writes in his book.¹

Sources and References

[EcoWatch November 7, 2014 \(Archived\)](#)

[Wikipedia](#)

¹ [Time March 25, 2015](#)
