

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT ORCA CAPTIVITY

The captive display of orcas is increasingly controversial. People are learning that this large, intelligent predator does not thrive in captivity. The glamorous show is a façade—behind the scenes, orcas suffer from confinement and separation from family, and trainers are at risk. Captive orca facilities have built an entire mythology, but these are the facts.

MYTH: Captive orca facilities do not capture killer whales in the wild.

FACT: While U.S. facilities have not captured wild orcas in recent decades, the Marine Mammal Protection Act still **allows wild capture in U.S. waters and the import of wild-caught orcas. Wild capture of orcas is also still happening abroad.** In 2012 and 2013, eight whales were taken from the Sea of Okhotsk to be displayed in aquariums around the world. Such capture is both inhumane and unsustainable.

MYTH: Research involving captive orcas has led to a greater understanding of wild orca behavior, reproduction, and conservation.

FACT: Research involving captive orcas has done little to advance scientists' understanding of wild orcas. Most of the published scientific research from captive orca facilities addresses captive breeding, such as artificial insemination. **This research has no conservation benefit, as this technology is used only in captivity.** Moreover, wild orcas are not suffering from breeding problems but rather habitat degradation, and captive orca facilities have generally not been active in efforts to address this.

Captive display has in fact had a serious adverse impact on wild orcas. The southern resident community of orcas in the Puget Sound region has been listed as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. This population's numbers were profoundly reduced when an entire generation was removed for captive display in the 1960s and 1970s.

MYTH: Captive orca facilities respect the important bond between mother and calf, and separate them only when a female is



Tilikum at SeaWorld Florida displaying logging—a listless floating behavior seldom seen in wild orcas.

unable to care for her calf or to maintain a healthy social structure.

FACT: In the wild, “calf” refers to offspring still dependent on the mother for survival—a period lasting five years, on average (until the mother has her next calf). Even after behavioral independence, offspring remain with their mothers for their entire lives. Although **captive orca facilities initially permit mothers and newborns to remain together, they routinely remove 2- to 4-year-olds from their mothers—sending the calves to other parks and immediately breeding the mother again. This separation is traumatic to both mother and calf,** and this unnaturally short interbirth interval can be physically and psychologically stressful to the mother. In some cases, the separation is permanent.

MYTH: Captive orcas receive adequate social interaction, as they have the company of other members of their species.

FACT: Captive orca facilities may provide whales the company of their own kind, but not of family. Some of these groupings include incompatible animals who exhibit dangerous

levels of aggression toward each other and their trainers. Given that the family bonds exhibited by this species are stronger than for any other mammal, including humans, **it is not sufficient to simply provide the company of other orcas. Family groups should be maintained.**

MYTH: Captive orcas receive plenty of exercise and mental stimulation.

FACT: Typical orca enclosures are less than one ten-thousandth of one percent the size of the species' natural home range.

A captive orca would have to circle the perimeter of a tank almost 2,000 times to travel 100 miles, a distance easily covered in one day by a wild orca.

Many captive orcas spend a large proportion of their time “logging”—floating near or at the surface of the water. This is unnatural—in the wild, logging is rare, even during rest. (Whales and dolphins continue to swim slowly when “asleep”—half the brain remains active, to allow them to continue to breathe, monitor for hazards, and maintain social contact.) In captivity, some orcas have been observed logging for hours over the course of many days. This lack of activity can lead to health problems. It also demonstrates the general lack of stimulation associated with barren concrete tanks.

MYTH: Captive orcas receive excellent veterinary care.

FACT: Captive orca facilities provide orcas with veterinary care, but this care is still more an art than a science. Broad-spectrum antibiotics are often administered prophylactically when a whale exhibits signs of lethargy or other “off” behavior. In addition, captive orcas may suffer significant dental problems arising from gnawing on metal gates and concrete tank walls. Many break their teeth, which must be drilled out, flushed daily, and can lead to serious infections; such tooth breakage is extremely rare in wild orcas.

MYTH: Captive orcas' life spans are equivalent to those in the wild.

FACT: For wild orcas, the mean life expectancy is 30 years for males and 50 for females. While a small number of captive whales have

approached or exceeded these mean life expectancies, most die in their teens and 20s and none has come anywhere close to the estimated maximum life spans of 60–70 years for males and 80–90 for females.

Recent research indicates that annual mortality rates are very low for wild orcas in Alaska—in some age classes, less than 1 percent of the animals die each year. **In captivity, annual mortality rates are at least 2–3 times higher than in the wild.**

MYTH: Orca captivity benefits many marine species because facilities that display captive orcas engage in animal rescue and rehabilitation work, and revenue from visitors makes this possible.

FACT: The rescue of marine life, while laudable, is **irrelevant to issues of trainer safety and captive orca welfare; it is a deflection.**

Although the industry touts high numbers of animals rescued, most of these are sea turtles. While this is important work, these facilities on several occasions have had the opportunity to rescue stranded whales and dolphins and return them to the wild, but instead have kept them for display (as “unreleasable”). A Florida facility currently is displaying young pilot whales acquired in this way.

In addition, a large portion of the funds used by these businesses for their rescue work comes from grants—including grants issued by the federal government under the Marine Mammal Protection Act—rather than their own revenue, and therefore would continue whether they display orcas or not.

MYTH: Trainers can predict orca behavior with a high degree of accuracy; therefore, working in the water with these animals is as safe as working with dogs.

FACT: Orcas are large, intelligent marine predators. While they generally and reliably respond to their trainers' commands, when they do choose to go “off behavior,” the results can be catastrophic. It is simply unsafe to put comparatively small and frail humans in close proximity to large and predatory orcas, especially in the water. Because of the size difference alone, orcas can easily and even unintentionally injure or kill a trainer.



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