

# Orcas in captivity

The orca is the marine environment's supreme predator; fast, intelligent, and highly sociable. Most are simply unable to survive in captivity.

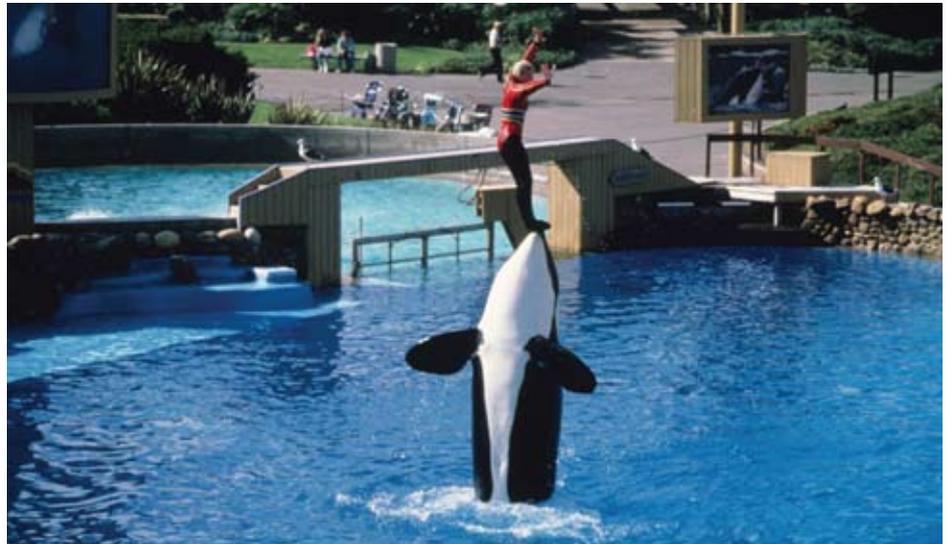
## Orcas in captivity

- At least 136 orcas (killer whales) have been taken into captivity from the wild since 1961. One hundred and twenty (120) are now dead (88%). (An additional male escaped after 2.5 years in captivity. His fate is unknown.)
- Of the 120 which died, average length of survival in captivity is approximately 6.5 years (range: 1 day - 28 years).
- Most captives die before they reach their early 20s, yet in the wild, females may live as long as 80 years or more.
- As of January 2008, a total of 44 orcas (15 wild-caught and 29 captive-born calves) are held in 12 marine parks in six different countries.
- Of 83 known pregnancies in captivity since 1968, only 38 captive-born calves (46%) have survived to 12 months or over (43 orcas calves didn't survive 12 months; while 'Stella' in Kamogawa Sea World is currently 11 months old and Malia in Sea World Florida is currently 10 months old).
- The current number of known orcas to have died in captivity is 148 (this does not include stillbirths, miscarriages or unborn calves were the mother died).
- Sea World holds 21 orcas, 47% of the world-wide captive total.

Killer whales, more properly known as orcas, have been kept in captivity since 1961, helpless victims of a blatantly commercial experiment which has seen dozens of wild orcas plucked from their families and forced to live in artificial social groupings which bear scant resemblance to their natural order. Unaware of



The mortality rate for captive orcas is staggeringly high. Most will be dead by the time they reach their 20's.



There are 44 orcas held in marine parks around the world. Almost half of them are in the United States.

their plight, millions of people flock each year to watch the orca show, seduced by the extravagant promises of the display industry. Glossy brochures herald a spectacle - billed "The Wettest Show on Earth!" which will simultaneously entertain and educate the whole family.

Visitors are invited to enter a fantasy land where orcas weighing several tonnes circle, leap

***"We have been led to believe that captivity benefits both onlookers and animals alike"***

and tail-slap seemingly out of sheer high spirits. Highly-choreographed show routines, performed to a background of tired old rock songs, are presented as "natural behaviour". Entranced, many of the spectators fail to register the bare concrete walls of the tank. At show's end, as they file out, few people notice the endless circling of the captives in the holding pools or the drooping dorsal fins of the males.

Clever marketing and showmanship have, however, failed to completely conceal the reality behind the razzmatazz. Visitors may experience feelings of disappointment, distaste and disillusionment after watching the orcas perform, finding it hard to articulate these feelings precisely, but aware that the docile, playful orca portrayed is far removed from the

real animal.

Similar emotions have been reported after seeing captive tigers or elephants - an awareness that the animal's dignity is demeaned and that, in 'taming the spirit of the great beasts', we, too, are somehow reduced in stature.

This growing uneasiness with the concept of keeping orcas in captivity has only been increased by a spate of newspaper articles and video footage documenting the reality of the captives' existence. Despite the best attempts of the display industry to blow a smokescreen over such negative publicity, the wider world is now increasingly aware that all is not well in fantasy-land. In recent years, first a trickle, then a steady torrent, of incidents have been reported. A growing catalogue of "accidents", illnesses, failed pregnancies and premature deaths has forced a dramatic reappraisal of the suitability of orcas for confinement.

Aggression between captive orcas and, equally disturbingly, aggression towards trainers, has increased in recent years. Disenchanted trainers and orca advocates alike have alleged that the mental and physical health of the orcas is highly compromised by the captive situation.

For years, the display industry has employed a variety of arguments in its attempt to justify keeping orcas captive. We have been led to believe that captivity benefits both onlookers and animals alike: entertaining and educating audiences whilst, at the same time, providing a comfortable life for the captives. But, as long-term research into wild orca populations increases our knowledge of the species,

***“...no fewer than eleven adult orcas have died, eleven calves have died aged four years or less...”***

so the glaring disparities between the lives of the captives and the lives of wild orcas becomes all too apparent.

The reality of existence for the captives has become painfully obvious: cramped, chlorinated tanks, often inhabited by frustrated and unhealthy whales, performing circus tricks which bear little resemblance to their natural behaviour. Many people now feel that witnessing such impoverishment is unlikely to yield sound educational benefits.

In 1992, WDCS commissioned a report entitled “The Performing Orca”. Researched and written by Erich Hoyt, the report provided an in-depth summary of the issues surrounding the captive orca industry. In the years following its publication, no fewer than eleven adult orcas have died, eleven calves have died aged four years or less and there have been at least six stillbirths/miscarriages - giving the lie to the display industry’s contention that captives are surviving longer. In fact, the most respected scientific research to date suggests that captivity is highly correlated with a dramatically reduced lifespan in the case of orcas.

However, there is some cause for optimism. Greater public awareness of the issues has led in turn to a willingness to question previously taken-for-granted assumptions about captivity. Attendance at several marine parks has declined in recent years and others have stopped displaying orcas altogether. Change will be gradual, but the very fact that change is taking place is important. For the sake of the captives, we must ensure that this momentum is not lost.

WDCS’s report - “Captive Orcas - Dying to Entertain You” - gives an up-to-date and comprehensive overview of orcas in captivity.



© WDCS / Bernard Aubon

**Orcas are powerful, intelligent animals - not toys.**