

Born Wild-Captured for Your Entertainment

by Danielle Brennan

SeaWorld: where young calves are taken away from their families to perform for your entertainment. Many families go to SeaWorld to see Shamu splash you at One Ocean but SeaWorld has many secrets on how those whales ended up performing for our entertainment. Whales in captivity, all over the world, shouldn't be living in captivity because they have health problems that are uncommon in the wild and it's dangerous for trainers to be near these once wild animals.

All whales in captivity have mental, emotional, and physical stress from being taken away from their pod at such a young age when mother/child/pod relationships are a must. When a calf is born into a pod, they will stay with their family their entire life. The mother and pod members teach the new calf how to catch food and other valuable life skills. In captivity, they don't have a mother figure to teach them how to catch live food or other skills they need to know. In the wild, all male orcas have a dorsal fin that is standing straight up, yet 100% of captive orcas have a collapsed dorsal fin. Take Tilikum, at SeaWorld Orlando, for example. His dorsal fin is about 6 feet tall, yet you wouldn't know that by looking at him because his dorsal is folded over. A collapsed dorsal fin is an indicator of stress and low blood pressure due to reduced activity. Also, the average lifespan of wild killer whales is 30-50 years, in captivity the average is 9. Orcas that are held captive have aggression issues that you wouldn't see them display in the wild.

The trainers at SeaWorld have a dangerous job. You might think it's fun to train these magnificent creatures to splash the audience on cue. Before 2010, the trainers at SeaWorld were allowed to perform in the water with the whales. Sure, they knew the danger of riding them like a surfboard or letting them push you up by their rostrum (the tip of their mouth) when you're 50 feet below the surface, but they never thought that could be them; getting attacked by their beloved orcas. The first fatal attack happened February 2, 1991 at SeaLand of the Pacific where Tilikum attack a trainer, Keltie Byrne, after she fell into the water. The last fatal attack, that changed the view on trainers in the water, happened in 2010, when a beloved

trainer, Dawn Brancheau, was attacked by Tilikum while doing a Dine With Shamu. Since then more than 100 aggression incidents have been reported.

Although some experts say having whales in captivity can help scientists and educate the public, I believe that there is only so much captive whales can teach scientists. The whales can teach scientists how big the calves are when they are born and how big the adults get without disrupting the wild population. SeaWorld also offers a variety of educational camps for preschool through 8th grade. The camps let you have an up close educational encounter with the whales at SeaWorld. However, you can also get the same amazing experience by whale watching. You can observe killer whales performing natural behavior and see them breach and spy hop on their own. You may also see a calf who will stay wild its entire life, and never know of the cruelty other orcas are facing.

So in conclusion, whales shouldn't be kept in captivity because they have many health issues. It is also dangerous for trainers to be interacting with this top predator. On the flip side, it's good for scientists to help the wild population and general public to learn more about these magnificent mammals. But the 53 whales already in captivity will never see their families again. Tilikum, Nalani, Katina and Trua are four of SeaWorld's 22 orcas that are forced to call a small pool "home", and will never know what it means to be wild.