

# SeaWorld and Blackfish

By Barry Kent MacKay

Born Free USA

March 2014

The movie, *Blackfish*, is categorized as a documentary. It is more of a polemic, presumably to some degree as a result of the inability of its producers to engage SeaWorld apologists in on-camera dialogue. Now SeaWorld is speaking out, claiming that *Blackfish* is misleading. We have reviewed two very similar online defences from SeaWorld (there may be more) and we will address arguments made in both. They are arguments quite typical of what we have encountered through many years from the zoo and aquarium industry.

The *Blackfish* filmmakers don't need us to defend their film, it is true, and indeed, have access to far more information about both the film and SeaWorld than do we. But Orcas and other marine life need all the help we and other animal protection and conservation organizations can provide in countering zoo and aquarium industry propaganda rationalizing the captivity of such species as cetaceans. Such propaganda must continually be critically analyzed if the public is to have any chance of coming to informed opinions. Public opinion is important in informing government policy which thus reflects public values.

None of us can be immune from bias formed by our own values and we will state ours: we want what is best for the animals, both as individuals (achieved through welfare) and as species (achieved through conservation) and their supportive habitat (achieved through environmentalism). We have no economic interest in SeaWorld, *Blackfish* or Orcas, beyond support given to us by the public and granting agencies for our work to advance our animal welfare and conservation goals.

Of course SeaWorld also claims an interest in animal welfare, conservation and environmentalism, thus the need for critical analysis of their critique of *Blackfish*.

If you have not seen the film, we suggest you read no further until you have done so. If you have seen it, what we'd like to do here is address at least some of SeaWorld's more serious accusations against *Blackfish*, and then our more general concerns about facilities like SeaWorld, Canada's Marineland, and various other commercial facilities holding captive wildlife, especially marine mammals generally, and orcas most particularly. We assume anyone reading past this paragraph has at least some familiarity with the controversy, and has visited SeaWorld or places like it, and has seen the film, *Blackfish*.

As a brief summary, *Blackfish* explores the horrific death of one of its trainers, Dawn Brancheau, in 2010, when she was killed by Tilikum, the orca who had been involved in previous "accidents" with trainers, drowning one, and almost certainly also killing a human intruder. The movie also explores the circumstances surrounding the capture and captive maintenance of Orcas, also known as "killer whales"

as they are highly predatory in the wild, but are actually the largest dolphins – not, technically, whales, although related to whales. “Blackfish” is another term for the species.

∞

### SeaWorld Says:

#### **Stock Footage, capture and captivity:**

SeaWorld has claimed, “Blackfish employs **false and emotionally manipulative sequences concerns the collection and separation of killer whales**: Through stock footage and video mismatched to the narrative, the film implies that the SeaWorld collects killer whales from the wild and separates mothers and calves. **NEITHER IS TRUE.**” (Emphasis theirs).

SeaWorld has, to date, refused open debate with the producers of Blackfish (or those involved with another movie about cetacean abuse, The Cove), but one thing they might do is show film of capture that is contemporary or recent. It is extremely difficult to obtain any film of Orca capture simply because the process of wild capture is brutal by nature and cannot help but separate animals who otherwise live in a communal structure from their cohorts. Thus the people who capture cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) do not want us to see the practice.

SeaWorld seems to think it is misleading to show “stock” footage that is forty years old, but does not explain what is fundamentally different in the film from current capture methods. Given the longevity of orcas, how can that age of the film be relevant? Young orcas captured that time, if captivity is as harmless to them as SeaWorld would have us to believe, would still be alive in captivity.

SeaWorld states that it had not collected Orcas (also known as Killer Whales, or, rarely, Blackfish) in 35 years. That, of course, means that they were doing what the “stock” footage shows, up until within five years of when it stopped directly taking Orcas from the wild, opting to pay others to do so. Orcas are not a domestic animal, and all Orcas held captive were either taken from the wild, or else they, themselves, have never known freedom, but their immediate ancestors, parents, were taken from the wild.

Orcas do poorly in captivity, and captive breeding produces high infant mortality. Thus captive breeding cannot maintain the captive population required by SeaWorld and similar facilities. That is why they resort to artificial insemination, as documented in Blackfish, even to using sperm garnered from freshly dead Orcas. While it might be argued by some that it is anthropomorphic to call the process by which the female captive Orca is inseminated with such semen as “rape” (the term that would certainly apply to an analogous situation involving humans), the process is neither beneficial to, nor chosen by, the female. It is not natural, nor is it the natural outcome of complex social interactions that occur in wild

orca communities. The resulting offspring, if any, are not the result of natural or sexual selection that occurs in the wild.

The term “stock footage” is often used to denigrate points being made about activities done by people or institutions who routinely avoid public scrutiny. The implication is that by not being current, “stock footage” shows something that no longer occurs. But unless the nature of the activity has changed in some significant way, the fact that the footage is relatively old or widely available is irrelevant. Film that shows what an atomic bomb blast can do to a structure is now quite old, but that does not render it inaccurate or of no educative value. There is no gentle way to capture an animal whose weight is measured in tons.

#### *Knowledge and Appreciation:*

After admitting that two of its captive Orcas were, in fact, wild caught, SeaWorld states: “In addition, our research has led to much greater important scientific insights surrounding marine mammal reproduction.” The argument is a *non-sequitur*. All hard data, no matter its origin, provides “scientific insight”, although its “importance” depends on what needs it serves. World War I provided “scientific insight” into the effects of mustard gas on human lungs, and that insight can certainly be important, but that does not justify the use of mustard gas, or war, or the methodology by which the “scientific insight” was obtained.

Scientists cannot help Orcas to breed in the wild via methodologies perfected by the zoo and aquarium industry, nor is there any reason to do so. Wild Orcas know how to breed, have been doing it for at least 2.6 million years, and their ancestors for a many millions of years before that. (The oldest Orca fossils date to the Pliocene era, 3.5 to 2.6 million years ago). What we need to do is maintain a viable environment in which they can survive.

#### **Separation:**

SeaWorld has stated it does not separate mothers and calves. It states, “SeaWorld recognizes the important bond between mother and calf. On the rare occasion that a mother killer whale cannot care for the calf herself, we have successfully hand raised and reintroduced the calf. Whales are only moved to maintain a healthy social structure.”

This is horrifically ingenuous. The fact is that Orcas, somewhat like elephants, have what is called a matrilineal social structure. Put simply, calves do not voluntarily leave their mothers’ company. Orcas may leave the mother upon maturity to the degree that, via mechanisms not yet understood, “inbreeding” is avoided, but the “society” in which an Orca is raised is multi-tiered, with small groups associated with larger assemblies. If an animal is forcibly put somewhere where there is no more contact with the mother, its “pod” or its “clan”, it is “separation” by any conceivable definition of the word.

It is not only that SeaWorld is misrepresenting itself, it is abusing a “teaching moment” that would allow the public to better understand the Orcas, as it claims it does, and learn that pods of interacting matrilineal-related individuals can help each other, with pods inhabited by two or three generations.

And we also know that if breeding, infant mortality rates and overall survival rates of Orcas in the wild were the same as they are among captive Orcas, the species would long ago have become extinct!

### **Investment in Orcas:**

There is an especially odd statement from SeaWorld, the absurdity of which possibly reflects a mindset alien to those who are dedicated to the causes of animal protection and environmentalism. SeaWorld, after talking about having “invested \$70 million in our killer whale habitats” and millions more annually, “in support of these facilities” states, “Our habitats are among the largest in the world today...”

What habitats? This time the debate is not even a matter of semantics. There are probably as many definitions of the word “habitat” as there are dictionaries, but let’s look at the first one that comes up on Google: “habitat: 1: the natural home or environment of an animal, plant or other organism. ‘wild chimps in their natural habitat.’”

Or for more nuance, we can turn to Wikipedia, which defines habitat this way: “A habitat is an ecological or environmental area that is inhabited by a particular species of animal, plant or other type of organism. It is the natural environment in which an organism lives, or the physical environment that surrounds a species population. A habitat is made up of physical factors such as soil, moisture, range of temperature, and availability of light as well as biotic factors such as the availability of food and the presence of predators. A habitat is not necessarily a geographic area – for a parasitic organism is is the body of its host or even a cell within the host’s body.”

What SeaWorld provides for its orcas meets neither of those definitions, nor any others. We could fill up the next hundred pages with the names of animals, plants or other organisms an orca can encounter during its lifetime in the wild and not mention one that it will ever encounter in SeaWorld’s tanks. And far from the space provided being “among the largest in the world today...” they are, in fact, a microscopic percentage of the size of habitats available to free, wild Orcas, habitats we call the Arctic, Antarctic, Indian, Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

As to the money “invested”, again looking at Google’s first reply to a search for the meaning of the word “invest” is useful: “the action or process of investing money for profit or material result.” In short, the expectation is that the money is spent not to help Orcas, but to generate a still greater amount of money, as from ticket buyers visiting SeaWorld, and buying products while there. The amount of money that is thereby derived that is greater than the amount “invested” is called a “profit”. It is the purpose of investment to produce profit. How much is spent is irrelevant to the Orca species unless it benefits its survival. How much is spent on the individual Orca is irrelevant from an animal welfare perspective unless the Orca benefits from being captive.

It is possible for species of limited intelligence (however intelligence is measured) to not suffer as a result of being confined by the zoo and aquarium industry. An ant in an ant farm, or, perhaps, a garter snake in a large and thoughtfully equipped terrarium, may indeed have no awareness of its confinement, thus no subsequent stress or deprivations. But an animal as highly intelligent and sociable as an Orca does, as the film, *Blackfish*, makes abundantly clear, experience stresses that lead to aberrant behavior.

That SeaWorld does not want that fact made clear does not negate the fact.

### **Good Food, Free Medicare, Mental Stimulation and Exercise:**

SeaWorld also claims it provides “restaurant-quality fish, exercise, veterinary care, mental stimulation, and the company of other members of their species.” Not to quibble, so silly is the claim overall, but a live salmon caught and swallowed by a wild Orca is fresher than what is served in a restaurant.

What is more relevant is that the diet and all else experienced by the captive orca is contrived, alien and fundamentally different from what is experienced in the wild, at all levels. In the wild the Orca is part of a site-specific complex and interactive, dynamic food chains. Choice of diet, which can include everything from small organism to chunks of large whales, depends on a multifaceted suite of ever-changing, interacting factors that can never be replicated in a tank. Both the wild Orca and the other species sharing its natural habitat affect each other.

The ability of the Orca to feed is dependent on the energy derived from the food equaling the energy expended in capturing the food and all other aspects of living. The less food, the greater the output of energy until a state of diminishing returns occurs, with a subsequent decrease in Orcas, manifested as a decrease in fecundity, immigration to more fruitful locations – or starvation. That is why in a naturally evolved predator-prey relationship, it is the amount of prey that determines the survivability of the predator. None of this becomes evident from seeing captive Orcas, who are simply fed via the same methodology that has done such a horrifically efficient job of destroying so many of the world’s fish stocks – the commercial fishing industry. Predators don’t deplete their prey; humans, being independent of the caloric value of the prey (by virtue of their unique access to technology), do!

We know this is a rather esoteric point to be made, but we think it is important to emphasize that there is nothing natural about providing food for captive wildlife. While it’s true that wild animals don’t have access to veterinary care, wild Orcas have less need, excepting those victimized by circumstances, such as the methodologies used to capture Orcas, and, ironically, the methodologies used to obtain the food that are fed to captive Orcas. Both fish nets and fish farms are shown to be deleterious to the environments Orcas inhabit, the natural prey they consume, and, in the case of nets, perhaps directly to the Orcas themselves (certainly many other cetaceans have become entangled in such nets).

And as for providing exercise and “mental stimulation”, we doubt any but the most obtusely uninformed reader of SeaWorld propaganda would believe that what Orcas can experience in captivity in any way resembles what is available to them in the wild. We will simply say that in the wild an Orca can swim up to thirty miles an hour in a straight line for as long as he wishes without crashing into a wall or anything

else. While Orcas tend to occupy home ranges of suitable habitat there are thousands of miles of open sea available to them. How does that compare to a tank at SeaWorld?

### **Lifespans:**

While longevity is not necessarily a measure of mental health or physical well-being, the fact is that the best objective indications are that wild Orcas live longer than captive ones. It is extremely difficult to measure longevity in wild animals, particularly long-lived and wide-ranging wild animals, or even to define terms (for example many very long lived species have very high infant mortality rates, raising the question of whether or not such early mortality should be factored in to estimates of longevity.) This is even truer for species that reach ages similar to the working careers of biologists, or long enough for the early lives of older individuals to predate technology that may allow direct monitoring. Scientists can an accurate age estimate by examining a dead Orca, but that only provides the age of that individual, and does not allow us to know if it died well before or well after the age normally reached by mature members of the species. The oldest known Orca, a wild animal, survived some 80 plus years and there is good reason to think some have lived more than 90 years, but only in the wild.

The one scientific relatively long-term study of age structures of wild Orcas that does exist, Life History and Population Dynamics of Resident Killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) in the Coastal Water of British Columbia and Washington State, P. F. Olesiuk, M.A. Bigg and G. M. Ellis, Rep. In Comm (Special Issue 12), 1990 (see: [http://www.freemorgan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/olesiuk\\_et\\_al\\_1990\\_resident\\_orca\\_bc\\_wa.pdf](http://www.freemorgan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/olesiuk_et_al_1990_resident_orca_bc_wa.pdf)) indicates clearly that Female Orcas in the two Orca communities studied, have a mean life expectancy of 50.2 years and typically give birth the first time at the just under fifteen years of age. Only one of SeaWorld's female Orcas is, by their own admission, "close to fifty".

Males in the study by Olesiuk and colleagues had a mean life expectancy of 29.2 years, although much older males are known. There really is no comparable study, but ongoing work has underscored its accuracy. Captive Orca ages are, of course, known with greater accuracy and they simply do not live as long as do wild ones. Twenty years ago some 65 Orcas had been caught for the zoo and aquarium industry, but at this time only three of those are still alive.

As is true of captive penguins, various respiratory infections seem to be the greatest contributor to early mortality in captive Orcas.

### **Captive Orcas Benefit Wild Ones:**

SeaWorld has claimed that captive Orcas somehow benefit the species in the wild. Since captive Orcas at SeaWorld and wild Orcas have no contact with each other, clearly captive animals cannot directly benefit wild ones. So what is meant by SeaWorld's claim is that scientists can access living Orcas up close if those animals are captive, far easier than they can wild ones, and can more easily observe certain traits and behaviors.

It is worth noting, in that context, something that SeaWorld fails to mention, even though it is a core message of the film, *Blackfish*, they seek to discredit. And that is the fact that captive Orcas (and other wildlife) often display behavior not seen in the wild. For example, as *Blackfish* accurately documents, captive Orcas sometimes kill humans. Wild Orcas have been known to briefly go after humans in wetsuits (the most often seen theory is that the humans are mistaken for seals or sealions – which can be natural prey species), but there is no record of them actually killing a human, and they have never been seen to hold a human underwater long enough to drown, or causing massive trauma to a human. Captive Orcas have done all these things.

After stating that some Orca populations are endangered, SeaWorld says that it is possible to conduct “...controlled research and study...” that is simply not possible in the wild. But SeaWorld then states research “...has significant real-world benefits” to wild Orcas. It does not name them let alone say why they are “significant”.

SeaWorld states: “Some populations of wild killer whales have been classified as endangered or threatened, demonstrating the potential (*sic*) critical nature of these research opportunities.” What does that mean? At best it is just poor grammar, since the conservation status of a population does not “demonstrate” anything about research, *per se*. Obviously when a population of wild fauna or flora is endangered, if it is to be protected or hope to recover, we need knowledge of the species. But SeaWorld apologists indicate no area of research involving captive Orcas that tells us how to reverse or mitigate known activities (including the oceanic fishing industry, which SeaWorld’s activities help to profit) that lead to threats or endangerment of Orca populations. Nowhere is it explained what can be learned from a captive Orca that will help its species, which is not endangered, or some populations, which may indeed be threatened, survive, that cannot be better learned from studies of wild Orcas.

There are two possible caveats we can think of. It has been 37 years since the movie, *Orca*, threatened to do to the reputation and public perceptions of Orcas what the movie, *Jaws*, did two years earlier to the reputation and public perceptions of Great White Sharks, and paint them as revengeful creatures seeking human blood. The reputations and public perceptions of Orcas (and, to a lesser degree, Great White Sharks) have changed. And in part that public perception of Orcas has been modified as a result of Orcas being kept captive.

We now know that Orcas don’t normally attack or hunt down humans, and we think in part the early years of keeping Orcas in captivity contributed a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, these animals as intelligent, sociable apex predators. But that function has not only long been served, the pendulum has swung far past a reasoned understanding of the Orca to the point that they have become, in the minds of many, a gentle and loving, panda-colored creature who enjoys entertaining us, doing silly tricks and stunts and serving human interests as a modern-day jester whose pool-side antics can elicit shrieks of surprise, laughter and applause. “YOU’RE GONNA GET WET!” None of this teaches us anything much about Orcas or the world where they truly belong or how to protect them or their habitats from their greatest threat -- us.

Those of us in the business of caring about individual wild animals and the integrity of their environment, have also learned that captivity does not work for these animals, and creates enormous stress in them that manifests itself in aberrant behaviour, including self-mutilation, stereotypic behavior and attacks on their trainers.

It is as if SeaWorld's collective knowledge of Orcas was frozen in time, to when we had learned they could be "tamed" and trained, and made to more or less survive in captivity, and even be dominated by we puny-by-comparison humans, without going beyond that to learn how hostile captivity was to them, and the threat it posed to the employees who, like the animals, are put at risk in the name of profit.

And now, in a "blame the messenger" mode, SeaWorld tries to denigrate the movie that brought concerns many of us have had for years, together in one eminently accessible vehicle, *Blackfish*.

Second, while we know that cetaceans echolocate (like bats and even some birds and other fauna) it may very well be that the degree to which studies of echolocation in captive animals had enhanced understanding of the phenomenon, true conservationists may be able to use a little of the data from captive cetaceans in fighting aural disturbances to wild populations. We doubt that the information is of much value in that regard but we are struggling hard to find a basis in fact that would support SeaWorld's allegations, since SeaWorld itself, in the documents we have seen, does not do so.

#### **Animal Rescue:**

The sharpest arrow in SeaWorld's quiver of defence may well be the argument that it, an undisclosed percentage (estimated by SeaWorld detractors to be about 0.0006 percent of its revenue) of its profits, and its collective expertise contribute to wildlife rescue and rehabilitation.

We are supportive of three rationales for having wild animals in captive conditions. They are: 1, wildlife rehabilitation; 2, sanctuaries; and 3, captive breeding (particularly *in situ*) of rare, threatened or endangered species if solidly connected to a feasible plan for release into suitable habitat. SeaWorld meets none of these criteria as its *raison d'être*, or ambit or function, but, can contribute to the first one, wildlife rehabilitation, including rescue, to the degree that it has resources that can aid in restoring disabled or injured or orphaned wildlife of a small range of species, back to the wild. Even 0.0006 percent of its revenue is more than can be found in the coffers of many NGOs dedicated to marine life rescue and rehabilitation.

NGOs who work in the wildlife rehabilitation community are forever in need of funding, primarily, and expertise, intermittently.

Funding is a problem for most wildlife rehabilitation endeavors because the action of providing care for orphaned or injured animals, or other animals unable to care for themselves in their natural environment without first benefitting from some level of assistance from human care-givers does not produce a product or service for which there is a great enough demand to generate needed funding. The same circumstance applies to sanctuaries. This is an over-generalized statement to the degree that there are individuals who both have and are willing to share economic and other resources in the



interest of assisting wildlife rehabilitation activities, and/or sanctuaries. There are also various granting agencies willing to assist, but the need is always much greater than available funding can service.

Both these activities, wildlife rehabilitation and sanctuaries, function independently of the third acceptable reason for holding wildlife captive: conservation. With some notable exceptions to be sure, neither wildlife rehabilitation nor sanctuaries contribute significantly to conservation, although the ability to do so exists and is exercised by some sanctuaries and rescue centers who do work with threatened species (elephants, for example). Some primate sanctuaries have campaigned against biomedical research that takes threatened species from the wild. The expertise and credibility that derives from rescue and rehabilitation work is sometimes directed toward support of legislation in support of conservation, but none of this applies to SeaWorld.

All three of these activities tend not, in and of themselves, to generate adequate funds from the public. The zoo and aquarium industry can generate self-funding, but rarely if ever as a function of solely keeping animals captive and certainly not from keeping animals captive under conditions where the needs and well-being of the animals take precedent over allowing the public to view and be entertained by them. What is important to the zoo and aquarium industry is the degree to which animals provide entertainment and various commercial spin-off activities. Predominately, and again with exceptions, the zoo and aquarium industry is an entertainment industry, often with direct or indirect links to circus and other entertainments (even, in the past, including so-called “canned hunting”) using live animals.

The zoo and aquarium industry also claims to “educate” the public. Whether “education” is, of itself, justification for keeping a wild animal in captivity is a question that will elicit a variety of opinions, but the fact is that there is virtually nothing that is taught by these facilities that requires an animal to lose its freedom.

The zoo and aquarium industry is a business and business activity is designed, by definition of the term, “business”, to raise money and produce profits. Wildlife rehabilitation, sanctuaries, and endangered species captive-breeding-and-release programs are not businesses, but are non-profit activities. They can benefit from the largesse of businesses, including successful business practitioners, but there is absolutely no reason why such largesse should come from profits resulting from the use of animals. Various foundations and granting agencies help out. Many wildlife rehabilitation endeavors and sanctuaries are registered (thus heavily regulated and monitored) charities empowered to provide a degree of tax exemption for donations. They may do some marketing, but it is not their function to generate profits.

It is not the funding of good work that is the issue, it is the way in which the money is earned in the first instance. One could go into a public or private garden, cut all the flowers, bundle them and give them out to poor patients in hospitals and charitably-funded senior citizens’ homes, and feel good that poor people are cheered up by flowers. However, such good deeds do not justify the wrongness inherent to destroying the property of other people’s, or publicly-paid for, gardens. What is right does not provide justification for what is wrong.

The real expertise required by wildlife rehabilitation organizations is usually developed within the wildlife rehabilitation community, so while we are grateful that SeaWorld had developed procedures, products and methodologies that may be applicable to wildlife rescue and rehabilitation, given the required resources we have no doubt, based on experience, that the wildlife rehabilitation community would better develop such procedures, products and methodologies on its own.

Meanwhile, it has to be said that while BornFree USA fully supports the goals of proper and effective wildlife rehabilitation, we also recognize that the practice of wildlife rehabilitation does not address the root causation of problems that have beset most animals that require the service. To a variable degree by far the greatest numbers of causes for wild animals requiring rehabilitation are anthropogenic (human-related) and SeaWorld does little if anything significant with its resources to address these concerns. Oil spills, over-fishing, dolphin and whale hunting, non-biodegradable drift-net fishing, over-fishing, sonic-testing, climate change and subsequent ice melt, fishery by-catch, shark-finning, abandoned lobster and crab traps, fish-farming, siltation, exotic species introduction, agricultural run-off and eutrophication, acid rain, loss of the ozone layer, biomass reduction...there are so many different and variable threats to the ability of the oceans to sustain marine life and far from challenging them, SeaWorld and other aquariums help fuel at least some of these problems.

#### **Employees:**

In any social dichotomy of the type represented by SeaWorld's antipathy toward the film, *Blackfish*, there tends to be certain tactics employed. Usually it is use of language, by both sides, to support a specific bias or emphasize those points favorable to a given position. But there is also the tactic of either using, or abusing, current or former employees' opinions.

Such opinions are provided in both sides of the *Blackfish*/SeaWorld controversy. This is, as we say, a commonplace tactic in any polemic that advances a theory, and is usually posited thus: employees supporting the institution being criticized are credible by virtue of having employees' insider information and personal experience; employees are considered disgruntled ex-employees if they oppose, to any significant degree, what the institution did.

Employees critical of the institution, and this is most certainly true of employees of the zoo and aquarium industry, face several hurdles. They may be challenging an institution with far greater resources than their own, thus capable of launching "slap suits" against the former employees, costing those ex-workers more money than they have to defend themselves, even though, were they able to afford it, they'd win in the end. Or the critical employees may wish to continue working in the zoo and aquarium industry and know that they will be blackballed if they dare to speak out. They risk having their own personal reputations sullied by smear campaigns, since they tend to be less sophisticated, and have far fewer resources, than the owners of the institutions whose claims they challenge. Finally, there is the embarrassment of admitting to having initially been wrong, since most people who work in the zoo and aquarium industry at the trainer or keeper level so do out of a passionate desire to be close to various normally inaccessible animal species.

Blackfish may, as its critics claim, illustrate certain parts of the audio narrative with video that shows something very different. Certainly the structure of the film is, as is inevitable, theatrical, and designed to generate emotional reaction. It could hardly be otherwise given the practical need to telescope a wide spectrum of events over time into a watchable length with entertainment value.

That said, the apologists who are former or current staff seem to miss the point. For example, it is not that every Orca calf (not many) born at SeaWorld is separated from the mother, but rather, that they would not be there in the first place, but for such separation, in the wild, initially. It hardly matters which trainer was standing on the back of which Orca...the act of anyone doing this is inherently silly...teaches us nothing about Orcas beyond that they allow themselves to be “trained” to do tricks and are capable of swimming in relatively tight circles, and, of course, puts trainer at some degree of risk.

There is, in employees’ defense of SeaWorld, an allusion to Tilikum, the Orca involved in the “accident” that took one trainer’s life. The same Orca was also in a tank, in Canada, in 1991, where another trainer was killed, drowned by the three Orcas in the tank with the young woman who was killed. Does it really matter that Tilikum was only one of three Orcas? The fact is a 20 year old competitive swimmer was in the tank with Tilikum and two pregnant Orcas when she was held underwater, and prevented from grasping a life ring by the Orcas. She screamed for help, surfacing three times before dying.

Similarly, Tilikum was in a tank in 1999, when a 27 years old visitor who had hidden himself and remaining as a trespasser on SeaWorld property after-hours, unseen, entered Tilikum’s tank. The intruder’s naked body was later found draped over Tilikum, the man’s body mutilated, genitals reportedly bitten off. Does it matter that his death may have finally been from drowning, or hypothermia? Does it matter that he did a foolish thing? He didn’t mutilate himself and it strains credulity to assume that the Orca was somehow not involved in the man’s demise.

And finally, does it really matter that the report that Dawn Brancheau’s arm was not actually swallowed by Tilikum, when an autopsy showed she had a severed spinal cord, fractured jaw and ribs and cervical vertebrae?

And does it matter that SeaWorld does not, itself, take Orcas from the wild when it pays others to do so? Does it matter that the young Orcas separated from their mothers were older when that happened, than they were when the photos of them shown in Blackfish were taken? Isn’t the point that the industry couldn’t survive without taking animals from the wild, without separating them?

We fully understand that there are people who think what is achieved from placing Orcas in captivity justifies the practice. Throughout human history animals, and people, have been and continue to be abused in return for a wide range of “benefits”. The people doing the abusing invariably support it based on their own value systems, and more to the point, thereby are critical of others who don’t share such value systems. The history of social reform is one of conflict between opposing value systems. We cannot resolve such conflicts here. The dialogue is always valuable, and as we said at the outset, the producers of Blackfish can defend themselves. We would urge SeaWorld to take advantage of their offer to have an open debate.

But that said, we can state that if one's concern is the welfare of animals, imprisoning Orcas for the reasons that they actually are imprisoned makes no sense, and is demonstrably not in the Orcas' interests. It is true that the practice of keeping captive Orcas has helped result in a shift in public opinion of them overall, although we believe that it has not resulted in a significantly improved understanding of Orcas.

It is long past time that the practice of maintaining cetaceans in captivity is halted.