



Sea World is losing its grip on killer whales.

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A couple of weeks ago SeaWorld announced that they will no longer breed killer whales (orcas) and that the shows involving orcas will be replaced by an educational programme revolving around "natural orca behaviour". This definitely is a reason to celebrate, right? The new policy however only came into existence due to legal obligations and the need to boost their image and income. If Joel Manby, SeaWorld's CEO, gets his way the orcas currently owned by SeaWorld will continue to be exploited for the rest of their lives, without ever getting the chance to experience life in the ocean. But since the popularity of the company is going downhill fast, some NGO's are already developing sea sanctuaries in order to accommodate the killer whales.

Last year, when SeaWorld applied for a permit to double the size of the killer whale infrastructure of their amusement park in San Diego, they thought it would be granted easily. The Californian Coastal Commission was smart, though. They suspected that the 100 million dollars meant for the expansion of the orca accommodation would not be used to

improve the living conditions of the orca's. They suspected the money was intended to breed yet more orcas to sell them to new Asian amusement parks. That is why the Californian Coastal Commission only gave their approval on the condition that SeaWorld would put an end to its orca breeding programme.



Lolita in her small tank.

Applying for an appeal was of no use. Ever since the release of movies like "[Free Willy](#)" (1993), "[The Cove](#)" (2009) and "[Blackfish](#)" (2013) SeaWorld has been increasingly criticized for keeping big marine mammals in captivity and for [the way they treat the animals](#). In the documentary "Blackfish" it is seen that the orca Tilikum has [killed three people](#) during his imprisonment. His behaviour can be linked to traumas he has been suffering over the years, some caused by attacks by other orcas that were locked up together with him in a tank barely big enough to

accommodate just one killer whale. After "Blackfish" was broadcasted on CNN and was shown in movie theatres and a big number of schools throughout the US, SeaWorld ticket sales dropped dramatically. By the end of 2015 its revenue had dropped with 84% and the value of its stocks was more than halved.



Orcas suffer both physically and mentally when held in captivity.

[Sea Shepherd fears](#) that SeaWorld will continue to breed orcas in captivity by means of artificial insemination despite their announcement stating the contrary. After all, the orcas are not separated by sex and when a new killer whale is born they can easily state that the conception happened in a "natural way". Just weeks ago the show "Rambam" aired on Dutch television and [showed](#) that the dolphinarium Harderwijk deceives its visitors in the same way. Additionally, SeaWorld does not plan to stop or decrease the captive breeding of their other marine mammals like dolphins, false killer whales and pilot whales.

Concerning the plan to change the orca-shows into an educational programme showing natural orca behaviour, animal welfare organisations are sceptical as well. The expansion of the show tank in San Diego has recently been cancelled. CEO Mandy stated that

they can "improve the wellbeing of the orcas in a much cheaper way". This means that also the new shows will be held in the same confined blue cells which accommodate the orcas today. In the wild, killer whales swim up to 120 km (74,5 miles) per day while some of the tanks at SeaWorld are barely a couple of times longer than the body length of the animals they contain. The concrete tanks in which the animals are held are also deprived of stimuli. This means that they provide space nor opportunities needed to activate natural orca behaviour. Moreover, a decrease in exercise compared to the current shows will only increase the feeling of boredom the orcas already suffer from.



Orcas display aggressive behaviour towards each other triggered by stress.

The SeaWorld amusement parks of California, Texas and Florida combined hold 29 orcas in captivity. The age of these animals ranges from 1 to 51 years. Since the lifespan of these mammals is similar to that of human beings, it is only logical to assume that many of these animals will continue to suffer for decades to come. Therefore, over the last couple of years, an increasing number of NGO's plea to accommodate the animals in delimited fjords or bays instead, in a kind of orca-sanctuary. For killer whales born in the wild, the ultimate goal might even include a full release back into the ocean. [SeaWorld's reaction to this suggestion](#) is extremely negative. They claim that relocating the animals out of the SeaWorld parks would be dangerous, even fatal for the orca's as they would fall victim to pollution, diseases and bad weather

conditions. The money needed to realise natural sea pens would, so they say, be far better spent on more endangered species, to fund the war against elephant poachers for example. CEO Manby also claims that the whole release-into-the-wild project concerning Keiko, the star of "Free Willy" and the only orca that has ever been intensely rehabilitated to be released, [had failed](#) because Keiko died of a lung infection, a year and a half after he was released.

In truth, [Keiko](#) was one of the most unhealthy orcas kept in captivity to start with, even before the release project took off. Keiko had a very weak immune system due to the maltreatment he received in the Mexican park where he was held. He suffered from ulcers, digestive disorders and a viral skin infection. During the course of two years rehabilitating in a sea pen in Oregon, Keiko gained close to 1000 kg (more than 2000 pounds), got rid of the ulcers and the skin virus and his cardiovascular condition together with his muscle power improved spectacularly. His transportation to Iceland followed suit, where he learned to hunt

independently. He also started to go further and further out in the ocean and he interacted with other marine mammals before he was fully released into the Atlantic Ocean, where he swam from Iceland to Norway.



Keiko in his bay in Iceland. Copyright Joshua Records, LCC.

Keiko in his bay in Iceland. Copyright Joshua Records, LCC.

During the six years that Keiko was living in the ocean, 14 orcas worldwide died in captivity, confined in their tiny concrete tanks filled with chlorinated water. Of these 14 individuals, two died at SeaWorld due to lung infections, the same disease that killed Keiko. One of these two, Katarina, was only diagnosed with this illness by the park a day before she passed away. The other orca, Bjossa, had a chronic condition that veterinarians were unable to cure. This illustrates how absurd it is

to claim that Keiko died because he was released into the ocean. In addition, Keiko is [not the only](#) orca that lived and thrived in a sea pen. Some of these other orcas were fully released as well.

"When creating a sanctuary for orcas it is imperative to choose a suitable, sheltered location with a good water quality and water circulation, but the advantages of a sanctuary are much greater than the risks", so explains Naomi Rose, who is a professor, marine biologist and orca expert. "In sea pens orcas can enjoy a much larger and deeper area with natural sea water and they can experience the tides again. On top of that they can learn to feed on live prey and they can interact with other marine wild life. It is obvious that sea sanctuaries provide a much healthier, safer and humane environment for marine mammals compared to concrete tanks. SeaWorld plainly uses empty arguments in order to maximize their profit while keeping the costs as low as possible."



Keiko in zijn baai in Island. Copyright Joshua Records, LCC.

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*De bay where Keiko rehabilitated.
Copyright Johshua Records, LCC.*

Animal welfare organizations have in fact already put up complete step-by-step rehabilitation procedures for certain orcas held in captivity. There is a detailed protocol to rehabilitate [Lolita](#), the orca kept in the sea aquarium in Florida, as there is for [Morgan](#), the orca that was caught in the North Sea and eventually placed in the dilapidated Spanish Loro Park. On top of that orca experts like Dr Ingrid Visser have designed a [huge facility for retired orcas](#) where killer whales can live in large bays together according to sex and, when possible, place of birth. The plans include observation platforms for visitors where they can watch the orcas from an adequate distance. Unfortunately the realisation of such a plan comes

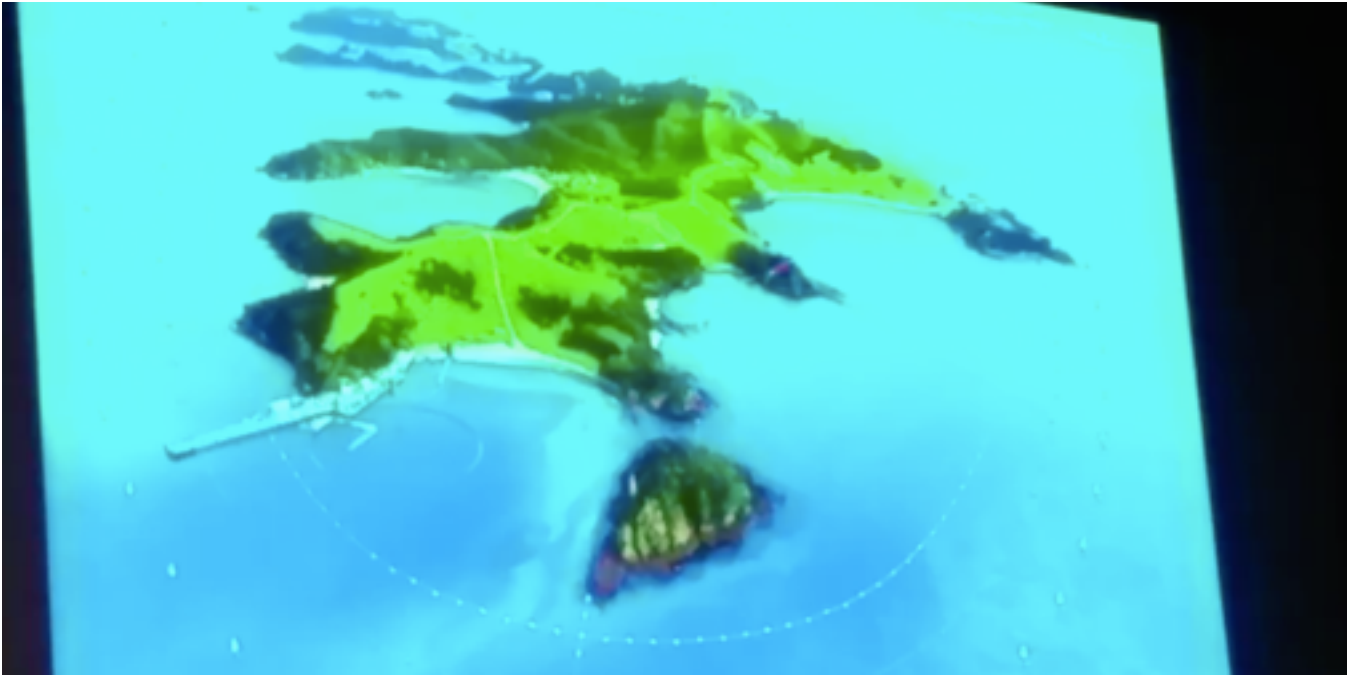
with extremely high costs. Although the retirement facility would be self-sustaining up to a certain degree by the sale of entrance tickets, food and drinks, large initial investments would be essential.



*Proposed sanctuary for Lolita.
Copyright Free Lolita the Orca.*

The infrastructure and care for the rehabilitation and release of Keiko cost a million dollars per year and were partially paid by a number of charity organizations and donations. Most of the money however came from Craig McCaw, an entrepreneur in the cellular phone industry. McCaw read about Keiko and its situation in the Wall Street Journal and decided to finance the plans of the [Free Willy - Keiko Foundation](#). So one would think this was a unique opportunity. But in October 2015 [Steven Dunn](#), the director of the toy company 'Munchkin', did SeaWorld [an offer](#). Dunn had seen the movie "Blackfish" and had taken the situation of the infamous and rejected Tilikum to heart. He offered to invest a million dollars per

year to grant Tilikum retirement in a sea sanctuary with the help of a team of top biologists and veterinarians. SeaWorld ignored the offer for several months.



Presentation orca sanctuary by Orca Research Trust.

When SeaWorld finally reacted, it was to announce that Tilikum had an incurable lung disease and that rehabilitation would no longer be possible for him. Dunn then changed his tactic. He now plans, in accordance with the [Whale and Dolphin Conservation](#) (WDC) organization, to start building the killer whale sanctuary anyway so it can be used to accommodate wounded or stranded orcas. In the meantime he encourages SeaWorld to hand over one orca, no matter which one, to live in the sanctuary. Aside from that, Dunn also hopes to be a source of [inspiration](#) to other successful entrepreneurs, so that they would follow his example and co-invest in a big rehabilitation facility for orcas.. When Dunn's offer to SeaWorld got [media attention](#) SeaWorld eventually reacted with following statement: "SeaWorld is part of the solution, not the problem. Our animals flourish in our parks and our scientific research and rescue efforts of marine

mammals make us a leader in protection and conservation of these species."

The Facebook page [Retire Tilikum the Orca](#) closely follows the efforts that are being made to retire orcas to sea sanctuaries.

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