

No more tricks!



Orcas performing at SeaWorld San Diego.
[Photo:Leon7]

More and more people now understand that animals don't just exist for human entertainment. Animal shows that are not good for the animals are being stopped. SHAMEEN IDICULLA reports.

SeaWorld is a chain of theme parks in America that was best known for its animal shows. Orcas were a big hit there, drawing loud applause as they did tricks to entertain audiences. Sadly, the animals were not having as much fun. Wildlife conservationists criticised SeaWorld's shows and the public responded by avoiding the shows. When ticket sales fell, SeaWorld started phasing out its "One Ocean" orca show. SeaWorld San Diego was the first in 2017. SeaWorld Orlando followed in 2020.

Orcas (also known as killer whales) belong in the dolphin family. Like other dolphins, orcas do not do well in captivity. They are highly intelligent creatures who love being in their family groups, swimming together up to 160 km every day in the wild. So, being kept in tanks is very uncomfortable for them.

Stuck in tanks

Swimming about in endless circles in small tanks causes boredom, physical agony, and even deformities. For example, in the wild, orcas dive to great depths to avoid harsh sunlight. They cannot do the same

in their comparatively shallow tanks. Without adequate protection from the sun's rays, many of them get terrible sunburns on their skin.

You might also notice that most male killer whales in captivity have the fins on their backs bent over. This is known as a dorsal fin collapse. The condition is not often seen in the wild. The reason it is so common among captive specimens might be linked to the unnatural surroundings the animals are in.

Orcas in tanks spend most of their time on the surface. As a result, their fins do not get a lot of support from the surrounding water to stay upright. This causes the fins to droop over time, say some marine biologists. Others believe that factors like dehydration, warmer temperatures in tanks, changes in the animal's diet, and reduced activity play a part too.

The artificial surroundings of a tank also interfere with their natural behaviour. Orcas and other dolphins rely on echolocation to find their way in the oceans. The animals send out high-pitched sounds which travel through the water. These vibrations bounce off surrounding objects and return to the orca. Depending on the strength and direction of these echoes, the animal can make out details such as the depth of the water, the location of obstacles or prey and their size.

However, orcas rarely use echolocation in a tank, because they know that there is nothing other than four walls surrounding them. And, without echolocation, they are as good as being blind and deaf, say experts. World-renowned oceanographer Jean-Michel Cousteau once compared their sad situation to "a person being blindfolded in a jail cell".

No pod life

Living in captivity also places the animals under great mental stress. Normally, orcas stay with their mothers for life and form deep relationships with their family group or "pod". Each pod even develops its own special language for its members to communicate with each other. This kind of closeness makes it especially hard for the animals when they are captured by humans. Observers have seen orcas making loud keening sounds as they are dragged away from their pods.

The ordeal can have long-lasting effects on the creatures. Some become depressed, while others can turn aggressive. If the stress becomes unmanageable, orcas can show unnatural behaviour like butting their heads against the tank walls and chewing metal bars till they break their teeth. A few have even attacked their human trainers without warning.

They also become prone to various illnesses and infections. While wild orcas have been known to live for 50–80 years, those in captivity tend to die much younger.

Winds of change

All these factors changed how people looked at the orcas owned by SeaWorld. Many began to question the humaneness of keeping these creatures under lock and key, and being forced to entertain us. Fewer were buying tickets to watch the animal shows. Celebrities boycotted events at SeaWorld to show their protest. Government officials stepped in as well, enacting new laws to protect the orcas.

The mounting criticism finally forced SeaWorld to make some big decisions. It announced in 2016 that it would not bring in new orcas from the wild, and that it would halt its breeding programme. The 20 orcas now living in SeaWorld parks will be the last generation of orcas the company will own. While these still perform at SeaWorld parks, the circus-style performances have been replaced with a new format that shows the animals as they would behave naturally in the wild.

Ripple effect

SeaWorld's announcement in 2016 renewed discussions about animal shows in other places too. People started to realise that animals should not be forced to entertain humans.

As a result, some showbiz companies made similar changes. The famous Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus ended its elephant performances in 2016. But, the very next year, the circus had to close due to poor ticket sales.

Universal Studios stopped using orangutans and capuchin monkeys in its shows. And, countries like India, Costa Rica, Chile, and Hungary banned public dolphin performances.

Meanwhile, SeaWorld now focuses on another one of its strong points: conservation and rescue efforts.

“Together, we will work against commercial whaling and seal hunts, shark finning and ocean pollution,” SeaWorld promised. It has a team that is on call 24/7 to help with rescue operations to save birds and animals trapped in fishing nets and oil slicks, or those that are stranded and have no other place to go.

It has helped with more than 38,000 rescues to date. It has also given US\$17 million to support conservation projects worldwide. And, its new orca shows are aimed at educating guests to protect wildlife and the environment.

Activity

Animal Idioms

Several phrases and idioms in English mention animals. For example, the expression “whale of a time” is used to describe how people are enjoying themselves. Can you complete the following idioms with the correct animal?

ELEPHANT, DUCKS, FLY, GOOSE, OYSTER, RAT, SARDINES, SNAKE

1. Like “a _____ in the grass”. = someone who betrays you after pretending to be a friend.
2. “The world is your _____.” = you are free to enjoy life’s many opportunities.
3. “Get your _____ in a row.” = get things organised.
4. “Packed like _____.” = pressed together tightly because of lack of space.
5. Like “a _____ in the ointment”. = a small detail that spoils a situation.
6. “Smell a _____.” = suspect something is wrong.
7. Like “an _____ in the room”. = an obvious problem that everyone is trying to ignore.
8. Like “a wild _____ chase”. = a hopeless search for something impossible.

For answers, go to Story8A at <https://digital.whatsup.sg/2021/05/animal-idioms/>