

Are You Kidding? Larger Tanks Won't Cut it for Killer Whales

August 21, 2014

Once again Sea World is missing the point. The aquatic entertainment enterprise just doesn't seem to give up despite documentaries like *Blackfish* and a growing public awareness that keeping cetaceans in captivity is cruel and morally wrong. Even Wall Street is turning its back on the company. Now, with a new and grandiose multi-million dollar plan for expanding their killer whale tanks, Sea World is taking the "logical" next step to resurrect itself.

So you may be wondering what's wrong with this new and purportedly humane expansion project? Plain and simple: these large brained, socially complex creatures need a lot more than doubling the size of a pool to flourish. Even if this new project called *Blue World* will be fitted out with "stimulating" orca-gadgets in all Sea World theme parks, killer whales need the ocean to live, not some new "water treadmill". They need to be left alone in nature where they belong and, if that is not possible anymore, they must be relocated to protected, spacious netted-off oceanic sanctuaries.

Will Sea World's larger tanks be an improvement over the current ones? Of course they will. The same way a bigger prison cell is an upgrade from being kept in solitary confinement. But this is not the point. Larger, plusher artificial tanks are not even close to addressing the spatial requirements of these animals.

Just think for a moment about how orcas live in the wild. These top predators can travel up to 100 miles a day in the ocean environment and resident killer whales have been clocked traveling at speeds of over 20km/hr [12 mph]. Ranging widely is an integral part of their existence and is essential to maintaining their physical and mental health. In



IN THIS PRESS RELEASE IMAGE RELEASED BY SEAWORLD ENTERTAINMENT LAST WEEK, THE COMPANY DEPICTS A STATE-OF-THE-ART, INNOVATIVE HOME FOR ITS ANIMALS, THAT "WILL OFFER PARK GUESTS UNIQUE AND INSPIRING KILLER WHALE ENCOUNTERS FOR GENERATIONS TO COME." THE FIRST OF THE NEW ENVIRONMENTS WILL BE BUILT AT SEAWORLD SAN DIEGO WHERE THE KILLER WHALE ENVIRONMENT IS PLANNED TO HAVE A TOTAL WATER VOLUME OF 10 MILLION GALLONS, NEARLY DOUBLE THAT OF THE EXISTING FACILITY. WITH A PLANNED MAXIMUM DEPTH OF 50 FEET, THE

the oceans, there are populations with stable matrilineal family-related groups and strong social bonds; females have a high level of care for their offspring, not unlike a human mother with her child. In the oceans, they socialize and communicate with their companions; they can collaborate to catch prey using ingenious techniques. They transfer information from one generation to the next. Like us, they have a form of culture.

SURFACE AREA OF NEARLY 1.5 ACRES
WILL SPAN MORE THAN 350 FEET IN
LENGTH.

I can't begin to list all the reasons why it is wrong to confine these animals to a tank, no matter how architecturally well designed it may be. I summarized some of the reasons in a [recent post](#). I pointed out not only why, based on what we know about these creatures today, captivity is unacceptable for dolphins, but also why observing dolphins in a concrete box is not a good educational lesson for anyone, especially a child. In tanks orcas can't thrive. They are impaired both psychologically and physically. They have aberrant behaviors never observed in nature. They are different animals altogether. Where is the educational lesson here?

Perhaps Sea World should take example from the [National Aquarium in Baltimore](#), which is currently considering the closure of all programs with dolphins in captivity by relocating these animals to sea pens. Perhaps Sea World should reflect on the proposed legislation attempting to ban killer whale shows and prohibiting the keeping of orcas in captivity in California. These are signs that something is changing, that there is a pressure from a more informed, educated public. People are finally realizing that enclosing orcas in tanks, even if tanks are bigger, is wrong.

Also, let's stop kidding ourselves. Sea World's design of new, expensive tanks for its three theme parks, starting with San Diego, is *not* in the best interest of the whales. As Jacques Cousteau once said, "*There's about as much educational benefit studying dolphins [and whales] in captivity as there would be studying mankind by only observing prisoners held in solitary.*" Keeping whales in captivity is more likely about enabling audiences to see the animals up-close which, of course, brings in more money and may help amp up future breeding programs. Being free, or at least living in an oceanic sanctuary, would be more in the interest of the whales.

Using logic and compassion wouldn't be the worst idea in this situation.

Maddalena Bearzi has studied the ecology and conservation of marine mammals for over twenty-five years. She is President and Co-founder of the [Ocean Conservation Society](#), and Co-author of [Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins](#) (Harvard University Press, 2008; paperback 2010). She also works as a photo-journalist and blogger for several publications. Her most recent book is [Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist](#) (Chicago University Press, 2012).

In [Changing Planet](#)

Tags [Maddalena Bearzi](#), [Ocean Views](#)





MEET THE AUTHOR

Maddalena Bearzi has studied the ecology and conservation of marine mammals for over twenty-five years. She is President and Co-founder of the [Ocean Conservation Society](#), and Co-author of [Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins](#) (Harvard University Press, 2008). She also works as a photo-journalist and blogger for several publications. Her most recent book is [Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist](#) (Chicago University Press, 2012).



Previous Post

[Scientists Solve Mystery of How Hummingbirds Taste Sweetness](#)



Next Post

[Social-Ecological Marine Restoration: A New Vision of Benefits for Nature - And People](#)



RELATED POSTS



The Dark Era of Orca Shows is Ending



South Korea bans importation of "The Cove" dolphins



Free Ride: The Case Against Whale and Dolphin Shows



The Dark Era of Orca Shows is Ending



South Korea bans importation of "The Cove" dolphins



Free Ride: The Case Against Whale and Dolphin Shows

ABOUT NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

The National Geographic Society is an impact-driven global nonprofit organization that pushes the boundaries of exploration, furthering understanding of our world and empowering us all to generate solutions for a healthy, more sustainable future for generations to come. Our ultimate vision: a planet in balance.

CONTACT



If you are a member of the media with an inquiry or interview request, please call during regular business hours or email

pressroom@ngs.org

(202) 857 7027



© 1996 - 2019 National Geographic Society. All rights reserved.

[Privacy Policy](#) [Sustainability Policy](#) [Terms of Service](#)

See our stories at NationalGeographic.com