

## The Dark Era of Orca Shows is Ending

March 18, 2016



A WILD KILLER WHALE OFF LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA. PHOTOGRAPH BY  
MADDALENA BEARZI/OCEAN CONSERVATION SOCIETY UNDER NOAA PERMIT.

By Maddalena Bearzi

There is light at the end of the tunnel. As Tilikum, the captive killer whale at the focus of the documentary *Blackfish*, is approaching death from an untreatable drug-resistant lung infection, SeaWorld just announced it will end all orca breeding.

No more orcas will be kept in any of their new parks around the world. The remaining captive killer whales will be the last generation enclosed in the tanks of SeaWorld facilities.

The entertainment enterprise is also phasing out its killer whale theatrical shows at its three U.S. theme parks in favor of other types of exhibits emphasizing these animals' natural behavior. As the cherry on top, SeaWorld let the public know about "a new partnership with the Humane Society of the United States to protect our oceans and the animals that call them home". The company stated that is "committing to educating its more than 20 million annual visitors on animal welfare and conservation issues through interpretative programs at the parks and expanded advocacy for wild whales, seals, and other marine creatures".

This is not just good news; it's a great step in the right direction for these complex, cognitive and wide-ranging wild animals that should have never been kept imprisoned in the first place ([read here to know why](#)). It is also a terrific example of how public pressure can induce real change when we truly care about an issue. This is something we all need to remember: we do have the power to change things if we decide to use it.

The horrific death of killer whale trainer Dawn Brancheau back in 2010 and the documentary *Blackfish*, featuring testimonies about these animals' poor conditions in captivity, opened the curtain on Seaworld's real world. Tilikum was not only the company's finest breeding machine. He was, and still is, a psychologically and physically tortured individual who's deprived captive conditions turned him into a true "killer". Let's not forget that no orca has ever killed a human in the wild.



KILLER WHALES BELONG TO THEIR HOME IN THE OCEAN. PHOTOGRAPH BY KIM PARSONS/NOAA FISHERIES

People around the world have finally realized that there is something deeply wrong and morally cruel about keeping these magnificent animals in tanks. Bombarded by hard-hitting critique for the last few years, SeaWorld had no choice than to change its course. And it finally did.

The end of orcas in captivity is nearing but our work, as an informed and compassionate citizenry, is not even close to done.

There are dolphins, and many other magnificent animals worldwide, that are still bred in captivity, and even those currently kept at SeaWorld and other facilities deserve a better existence. There are viable solutions for these dolphins: freedom in their ocean home for some, seapens for others who, because of their long-term dependence on humans in captivity, can't just be released.

Killer whales, like many (if not all) species, do not belong in captivity. They never did. Let's make this victory really count. Let's use our power and empathy to help other animals to live where they belong. In the wild.

**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 photojournalist and blogger for several publications. Her most recent book is [Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist](#) (Chicago University Press, 2012).

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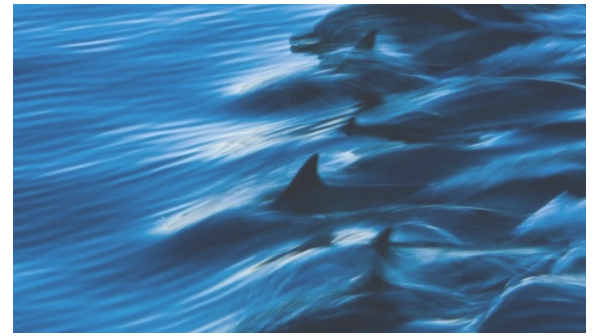
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