

THE BEHAVIOURS OF CAPTIVE KILLER WHALES

HOW DO KILLER WHALES HANDLE CAPTIVITY? UNFORTUNATELY, NOT WELL.

Killer whales are a lot like us! Killer whales are emotional, self-aware, massively social, and they are extremely intelligent [1]!

These traits combined with their striking appearance are what makes killer whales so fascinating! however, the same traits are also responsible for Killer whales' poor adaptation to captivity. Let's dig deeper...



ABNORMAL AGGRESSION

Aggression is the first Killer whale behaviour that pops into someone's mind due to popular media. unfortunately, this association is all too true.

Captivity provides a unique setting for killer whales to exhibit aggression to their social partners and humans [2]. Unfortunately, captivity also creates an environment where Killer whales cannot escape aggressive interactions [3]. Imagine being locked in your room with your siblings every day... yikes!



SELF HARM?!

Killer whales in captivity can become frustrated and bored and begin breaking their own teeth [4]...

SOCIAL STRUGGLES



MOMMA'S BOYS

Mother Killer whales will spend years rearing their young. When the mother passes adult male offspring risk of mortality increases [1]. Mothers improve survivorship in both young and old! [1]

Killer whales form longstanding social groups known as pods. Within these pods Killer whales play, communicate and learn from each other [3]! But the most important member of the Killer Whale society is the mother! However, captivity has shown to be destructive to these group dynamics.

Breeding programs in captivity bring about very abnormal maternal behaviours [1]. Mothers have been observed to reject their young and even attack them [1]. Killer whale maternal relationships are often prematurely severed by shipping Killer whales between facilities [1].

MORE ABNORMAL BEHAVIOURS

Beyond the behaviours we have already explored captivity produces even more strange behaviours. Among these behaviours is one that is particularly sad. Researchers observed a condition they refer to as "learned helplessness" [1]. this condition is most comparable to what we know as depression [1].

this condition caused whales to become completely disinterested in their surroundings and to just float about aimlessly [1]. But what is the main cause of all these behaviours? Stress! [1]



STRESS

The captive Killer whales feel stress for many reasons such as, lack of control, boredom, and unstable social settings [1,3]. The lack of control Killer whales feel in captivity is largely due to their inability to change social groups, diet, and routines, this was largely associated with learned helplessness [1]. Killer whales are brilliant animals and without proper stimulus they can become bored and frustrated, leading to aggression and more! Finally, man-made social groups often create tense and unnatural social settings leading to further stress [3].

THE FUTURE OF CAPTIVE KILLER WHALES

The experts in the field of Killer whale research broadly agree that these abnormal behaviour are suggestive that Killer whales are not suited for captivity as it is right now [1]. So what is the solution?

Enrichment! The Killer whales are so complex that it seems logical that their environment should fascillitate this complexity! The current tanks offer very little oppurtunity for learning and exploration [1]. The future of captive Killer whales need more complex habitats where they can express their natural beauty!

[1]Marino, L., Rose, N. A., Visser, I. N., Rally, H., Ferdowsian, H., & Slootsky, V. (2020). The harmful effects of captivity and chronic stress on the well-being of orcas (*Orcinus orca*). *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, 35, 6982. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvbeh.2019.05.005>
[2]Anderson, R., Waayers, R., & Knight, A. (2016). Orca behavior and subsequent aggression associated with oceanarium confinement. *Animals*, 6(8), 49. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani6080049>
[3]Sanchez-Hernández, P., Krasheninnikova, A., Almunia, J., & Molina-Borja, M. (2019). Social interaction analysis in captive orcas (*Orcinus orca*). *Zoo Biology*, 38(4), 323-333. <https://doi.org/10.1002/zoo.21502>
[4]Jett, J., Visser, I. N., Ventre, J., Waltz, J., & Loch, C. (2017). Tooth damage in captive orcas (*Orcinus orca*). *Archives of Oral Biology*, 84, 151-160. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.archoralbio.2017.09.031>
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