

DEBATE

SHOULD ORCA SHOWS BE BANNED?

A proposal to outlaw orca shows in California makes waves

On February 24, 2010, trainer Dawn Brancheau was lying on a poolside platform at SeaWorld in Orlando, Florida, rubbing the nose of a male orca named Tilikum. Suddenly, the 12,000-pound killer whale leapt from the water and dragged Brancheau into the pool. Horrified spectators watched as the helpless trainer drowned.

Four years later, Brancheau's death continues to spark controversy. Many people question whether orcas belong in captivity, a debate reignited by the 2013 documentary *Blackfish*. The movie argues that forcing orcas like Tilikum to perform for the public is inhumane and dangerous.

WORD TO KNOW

- **conservation** (*n*): the protection of animals, plants, and natural resources

DID YOU KNOW?

Killer whales are actually the largest members of the dolphin family.

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After the movie's release, people flocked to social media, demanding that SeaWorld end its practice of keeping orcas in captivity. The company's three marine parks in Florida, California, and Texas are home to 23 of the 24 captive orcas in the United States.

The film also caught the attention of California Assemblyman Richard Bloom. In March, he introduced a bill in the state legislature that would ban orca shows in California. The bill, which might be voted on next year, would also require marine parks to transfer captive orcas to sea pens. Such

enclosed areas in the ocean would give the animals more space than they have in tanks.

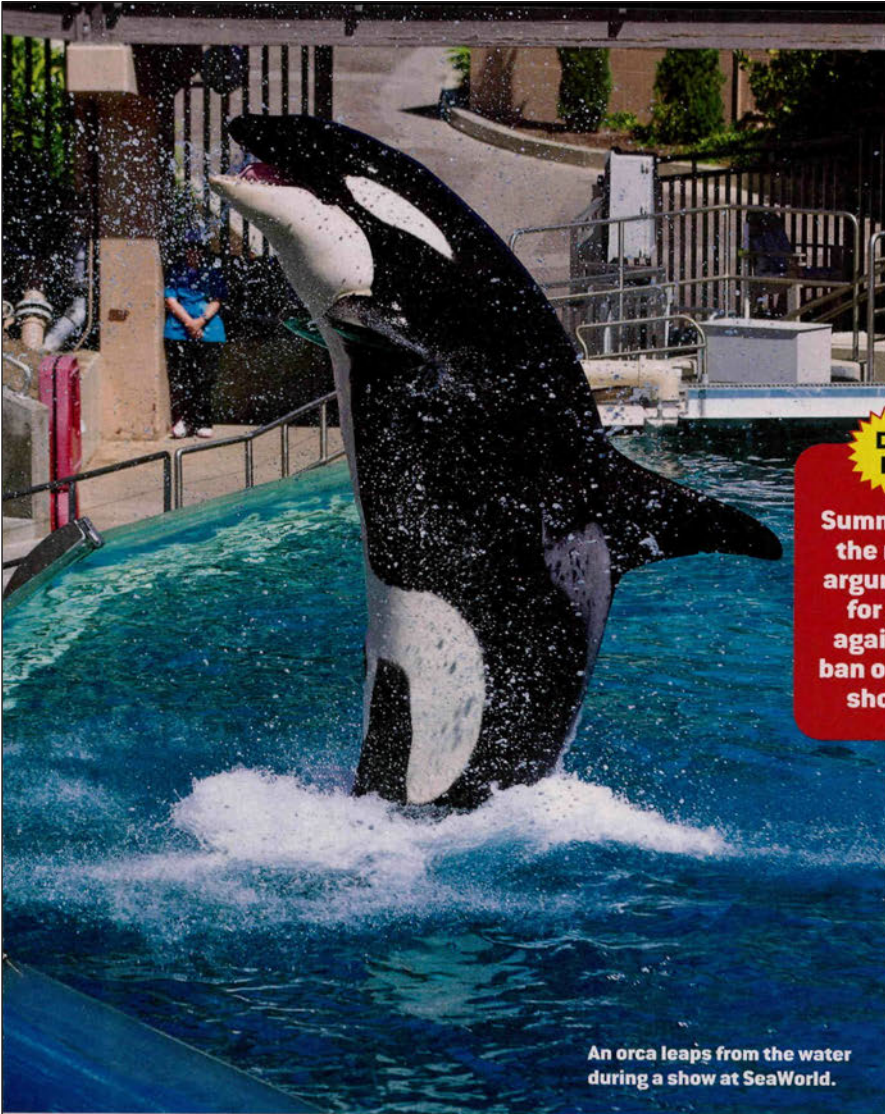
Bloom's proposal is the latest in the ongoing debate about whether orcas belong in captivity.

Asking for Trouble

Killer whales have been on display and performing at marine parks since the 1960s. Today, 53 orcas live at marine parks or aquariums worldwide.

"There is no justification for the continued captive display of orcas for entertainment purposes," says Bloom. "These beautiful creatures are much too large and far too





An orca leaps from the water during a show at SeaWorld.

Education and Research

Orca shows helped draw more than 3 million people to SeaWorld parks in the first three months of 2014. Julie Scardina of SeaWorld says the orcas are treated humanely and that the shows inspire visitors to care about marine animals.

“When you see a killer whale and it jumps 14 to 15 feet in the air right in front of you, that is a moment that you will never forget,” she tells *JS*.

SeaWorld says keeping orcas at marine parks is about more than just the shows. Christopher Dold, SeaWorld’s vice president of veterinary services, says the parks’ scientists are able to study the animals up close. That helps them figure out how to better protect the species in the wild, he says.

“Our approach is not just to care for all of the animals. It’s to study them and share what we learn,” Dold tells *JS*. “That knowledge will ultimately allow us to conserve those animals.”

Dold says captive orcas play a vital role in educating the public and increasing awareness about the importance of **conservation**. In the past 50 years, SeaWorld has contributed more than \$50 million for wildlife conservation, rehabilitation, and rescue efforts.

The company has also increased safety measures to better protect trainers and orcas. In the four years since Brancheau’s death, SeaWorld says, it has spent \$70 million to improve killer whale habitats at its three marine parks.

—Rebecca Zissou

DO IT!

Summarize the main arguments for and against a ban on orca shows.

intelligent to be confined in small, concrete tanks for their entire lives.”

Naomi Rose, a marine mammal scientist at the Animal Welfare Institute in Washington, D.C., says orcas don’t belong in captivity. In the wild, she says, they swim up to 100 miles every day and interact with other orcas in large, close-knit family groups called pods. Each pod has its own unique set of whistles, clicks, and calls that its members use to communicate with one another.

But killer whales in captivity are kept in small tanks with just a few other orcas—usually from different pods, says Rose.

“They are living with what are essentially strangers,” she tells *JS*.

Rose says that orcas are highly intelligent and social animals, but they become bored and depressed in their tanks. That makes them aggressive and causes them to lash out—as Tilikum did. There are no documented cases of orcas killing humans in the wild, says Rose. (Tilikum was involved in three of the four human deaths caused by captive orcas.)

“I think they are under a constant low level of stress simply by being confined,” she says. “They get frustrated.”

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