Why SeaWorld Should Be Shut Down

Posted on May 30, 2018

SeaWorld’s Public Image and the Reality of Captive Entertainment

If one looks at the webpage designed by the SeaWorld theme park company, the visuals are attractive and tempting enough to make anyone visit that place. The webpage also stresses the fact that if more and more people buy the tickets, then the company will be able to rescue more animals. The company has also added the number of animals that have been saved over the years, which goes as far as 31,644.

However, the crucial thing to note is that SeaWorld is not as animal-loving as it appears to be to the tourists and the people online. There is a history of complaints against the company regarding its ill-treatment of killer whales, which is the main reason for shutting down the water-themed part. The reasons will be listed as the discussion progresses. However, a brief history will be mentioned first before discussing the company’s treatment of the orcas.

SeaWorld was founded in 1964 in San Diego and drew people from all over the country to look at the newly developed park. It was in the spotlight for a long time till a documentary labeled *Blackfish* was released in 2013, which brought a lot of criticism to the park. The more people watched the film, the more SeaWorld’s ratings went down. However, the park did not pay much heed to all the criticism it received. Instead, it defended its position and told the world that the trainers were taking care of the sea creatures. The park made claims that the sea creatures were kept in large tanks and were treated kindly. Their lies did not cover up the truth for long, and the park was forced to shut down to keep the orcas and trainers safe.

Trainer Deaths, Orca Aggression, and the Human Cost of Captivity

Since its establishment, the park has claimed the lives of four people, of whom three were trainers who died because of the orcas. SeaWorld was known for keeping one of the most dangerous sea creatures, Tilikum, which was an orca that had been captured around 1983 when it was only two years old. The notorious orca had taken the lives of its trainers, yet the park continued to feature shows that had Tilikum in them. The park’s attitude towards the loss of three employees showed that they didn’t care about their staff members but only cared about their ratings. The orca was put into solitary confinement for a year for killing its third victim. The period of isolation completely disrupted

the orca's mental capabilities. An article that covers the stories of animal brutality by stating facts and figures provides a complete history of Tilikum's sufferings and pain that was instilled in him by not only humans but also fellow orcas because of the aggression that had been induced in him because of all the stress. The article *Over Thirty Years and Three Deaths* states that Tilikum was first captured by Sealand, which kept the orca in a confined space for over a year, where he was trained to perform all day long for seven days a week ("SeaWorldofHurt"). The stress of being separated from his family members and the ocean had driven the orca to exhibit aggressive behavior. When the orca refused to perform, the Sealand trainers starved Tilikum along with his tank mates, which made them attack him.

The death of one trainer from Sealand led to Tilikum being auctioned off on the market and bought by SeaWorld, where the cruelty toward the sea creature continued for years. The trainers of SeaWorld were no different than those of Sealand as they also maltreated the poor creature for not performing the way he was expected to in front of the crowd. A book based on the treatment of sea creatures highlights the problems that orcas face when they are forced out of their natural habitat and made to acquire patterns that are not meant to be learned by orcas, such as performing in front of crowds for seven days a week and being deprived of food for days. Also, wild orcas live up to 50 years, while in captivity, the average orca lives up to the age of 13 years because of all the stress that is induced in them by the treatment of their trainers ("SeaWorldofHurt"). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association highlighted the fact that the male orcas had been reported to live up to thirty years, while the female orcas were expected to live up to the age of fifty. However, an article based on why the orcas should not be kept in SeaWorld showed that the orcas' life expectancy was below average in this water-themed park.

Stripping an orca from its natural habitat and forcing it to acquire new habits was one of the reasons why the orcas had grown aggressive towards other tank mates and trainers. The modification of the orcas to the extent that they forget their natural habits and act like new orcas was quite unnatural and not something that was out of the ordinary. In an article based on the study of the free-ranging and captive killer whale populations, it was claimed that most research on killer whales and their physiological behaviors had been derived from captive populations. The results gave insight into the different habits of killer whales, such as echolocation, diving, reproductive behavior, and so on (Robeck et al.). A report based on killer whales showed that they are one of the most dangerous predators in the oceans and are seen mostly in the available habitats. Little has been found about the historical range of killer whales' ecotypes (Morin et al.). However, the data gathered shows that training such a dangerous predator in captivity for the sake of entertaining people is just out of the question, as these killer whales can harm the trainers at any time.

Beneath the Surface and the Psychological Harm

to Killer Whales

In a book titled *Beneath the Surface*, authors Howard Chua-Eoan and John Hargrove talk about the treatment of orcas in SeaWorld, which has not only been damaging to these sea creatures but is also harmful to the trainers as it puts them at risk while performing. Hargrove was a trainer at SeaWorld for around twenty years before he retired. Hargrove loved working with the orcas. However, the treatment of the killer whales by the staff disheartened the author, as he mentions in the book that the orcas were given a tough time for not performing well when told to do so (Hargrove and Chua-Eoan). The authors also highlighted the fact that the trainers were forcing the female orcas to mate with their children, which had been a cause of great psychological distress for the orcas. They were then forced to act playfully in front of the crowds and perform different tricks. Not only were the orcas put under psychological stress, but they were suffering physically, too, because of the forced mating. The pressure of it all had driven the orcas to act aggressively towards their trainers and had led to the death of two SeaWorld trainers (Hargrove and Chua-Eoan). The deaths of his teammates forced Hargrove to quit his job as a trainer at SeaWorld.

Hargrove further mentions in his book that the orcas were suffering more from physical stress than they were suffering from psychological stress (Hargrove and Chua-Eoan). The orcas exhibited odd behaviors when kept in captivity, such as hurting themselves by rubbing their faces against the walls or banging their heads on the pool walls out of boredom. Another behavior noticed in these orcas was that they showed signs of bulimia, which had been affecting their health. The teeth of the captive orcas were also worn down because they had aimlessly rubbed them on hard surfaces and floors of the pool, which had caused their teeth to break or led them to develop a bacterial infection, which resulted in the killer whales' death if they were not treated medically (Hargrove and Chua-Eoan). The orcas also appeared to have a dorsal fin because they had no place to swim as they were kept in confined spaces and were fed an unnatural diet of dead fish, which had affected their health. SeaWorld stated in an interview that the dorsal fin accusation was a lie and that it was a reasonable condition for orcas to have a fin like that. Hargrove also mentioned that SeaWorld thought of the orcas as nothing more than company assets that were meant to bring in a lot of money after every performance. The author left the company in the year 2012 and said that the place was a living hell for killer whales.

Another reason why these orcas should not be kept in SeaWorld is that the staff most often neglects their nutritional intake. Hargrove mentioned in his book that SeaWorld lied to the public by claiming that they fed the orcas food at all times. The company punished the orcas for not performing like they had been trained to do in front of the crowd, and whatever they were fed was polluted and unhealthy for the orcas (Hargrove and Chua-Eoan). The food that was being supplied to the orcas was contaminated, as reports showed that the fish contained high percentages of chemicals that had apparently been ingested by the orcas. An article published in the assessment of the dietary intake of the orcas showed that they were becoming sick due to the fish that they were being fed. Such a diet was leading the orcas to their deaths as the staff was negligent of their health (Formigaro et al.).

SeaWorld has been refuting these claims and has asserted in its interviews that the orcas live just as long as the wild ones do. The statements presented by SeaWorld are not accurate, as studies conducted on the captive orcas showed that they had been dying at quite an early age.

Blackfish, Public Opinion, and the Decline of SeaWorld

A decline in the sales of SeaWorld has been observed after the release of the Blackfish documentary, which has made people everywhere despise the park for its captivity of sea creatures and also for its brutal treatment of the orcas. In a book titled *Death at SeaWorld: Shamu and the Dark Side of Killer Whales in Captivity*, David Kirby asks his readers to think of themselves in place of the orcas that have been kept in captivity. He presents horrifying imagery as he writes about the way the orcas are suspended in the air ten feet above the water's surface. The author says that sea creatures should not be separated from their families and their natural habitat for the sake of entertaining others. It is not only cruel to the orcas but also inhumane (Kirby). Kirby gives gruesome details regarding the death of a SeaWorld trainer in his book to show the readers that the company has been keeping secrets from the public. When one of the orcas killed a trainer by the name of Dawn Brancheau, SeaWorld hid the reports concerning the cause of death. The company officials stated in a news report that the trainer had slipped and fallen into the pool. However, later reports said that Tilikum had dragged Brancheau by her ponytail before drowning her, and her ponytail was seen lying on the bottom of the pool (Kirby).

Aside from the fact that SeaWorld oppresses animals, the trainers also had to suffer on a daily basis as the pool water contained extremely high amounts of chlorine (Hargrove and Chua-Eoan). The amount of chlorine solution added to the water became a painful experience for the trainers as their eyes would burn every day, and most of the time, the trainers could not open their eyes at all. Hargrove gives detailed accounts of the employees' treatment at the hands of the SeaWorld company. When Hargrove first joined the team, he went through a horrible experience of coming face-to-face with the orcas. One of the orcas, by the name of Freya, acted playfully at first by rolling sideways and then grabbed Hargrove in her mouth like a twig in a dog's mouth. Hargrove survived the attack without facing any serious injuries, but this proves that killer whales cannot be depended upon even if they are trained for years in captivity. Apart from putting the trainers' lives in danger, the company did not pay them enough. The trainers' yearly net income was about $33,000, which amounted to nothing as compared to what they went through the whole year (Hargrove and Chua-Eoan).

Another critical aspect that confirms the debate about shutting down SeaWorld is that tourists are against the idea of having a trainer performing with the killer whales. In an article that highlights the concerns of the people of San Diego, Lisa Halvorstadt writes that the public is against SeaWorld's logic of having the orcas and employees perform together. Aquariums and zoos both put up animals

for display to attract tourists. However, SeaWorld has been criticized for making employees play along with the orcas while knowing that the killer whale is one of the most dangerous and top-ranking predators (Halvorstadt). In other aquariums and zoos, the main attraction is kept behind a glass wall or a fence so that tourists can get a glimpse of what is being displayed, be it a predator or not. On the other hand, SeaWorld likes to get one step ahead of others by putting its employees' lives at risk.

Performance, Confinement, and the Difference Between SeaWorld and Zoos

Animals at the zoo aren't forced to perform tricks every day, while in SeaWorld, the orcas were trained seven hours a day throughout the week to perform in front of a crowd. SeaWorld was more of a circus than a park from the way the shows were carried out (Halvorstadt). When asked what the public thought about SeaWorld's shows, people commented that SeaWorld was abusing animals for the sake of entertainment, as no animal is expected to be taken out of its natural habitat and forced to perform in front of crowds of people. The company has been making money off of animal abuse and needs to be shut down immediately. Furthermore, the company has been paying the city district monthly, which has been seen as a source of profit by the district. The more money the company makes, the more the city district gets paid for it (Halvorstadt).

Over the course of two decades, John Hargrove worked with 20 different whales on two continents and at two of SeaWorld's U.S. facilities. For Hargrove, becoming an orca trainer fulfilled a childhood dream. However, as his experience with the whales deepened, Hargrove came to doubt that their needs could ever be met in captivity. When two fellow trainers were killed by orcas in marine parks, Hargrove decided that SeaWorld's wildly popular programs were both detrimental to the whales and ultimately unsafe for trainers.

After leaving SeaWorld, Hargrove became one of the stars of the controversial documentary Blackfish. The outcry over the treatment of SeaWorld's orcas has now expanded beyond the outlines sketched by the award-winning documentary, with Hargrove contributing his expertise to an advocacy movement that is convincing both federal and state governments to act.

Animal Intelligence, Social Bonds, and the Moral Case for Closure

In *Beneath the Surface*, Hargrove paints a compelling portrait of these highly intelligent and social creatures, including his favorite whales, Takara and her mother, Kasatka, two of the most dominant orcas in SeaWorld. He includes vibrant descriptions of the lives of orcas in the wild, contrasting their freedom in the ocean with their lives in SeaWorld.

Hargrove's journey is one that humanity has just begun to take—toward the realization that the relationship between the human and animal worlds must be radically rethought.

In conclusion, it can be said that the inhumane treatment of the orcas is reason enough to shut down SeaWorld. Sea creatures are not meant to be kept in cages or small spaces, as they need to swim freely. By shutting down water-themed parks, a change can be made in the treatment of sea creatures, and people can be kept out of harm's way. Hargrove's book, based on the treatment of the orcas in SeaWorld, proves that the park needs to be shut down for the betterment of the orcas and the safety of the trainers. Sea creatures cannot be forced to acquire strange habits such as performing tricks and eating food that is not suitable for their health. The lives of animals and trainers matter a lot as both are living, breathing beings with rights of their own and should not be put in a situation where they can hurt another or be hurt by another. The cruelty of SeaWorld forces one to think that we as human beings do not consider animals as anything but commodities meant to entertain others and increase the ratings of the shows. Severe actions need to be taken against SeaWorld so that it shuts down completely and does not harm any more sea creatures for its own reasons. It is important to realize that the orcas are not meant to be treated as assets, as they are not used to being kept in cages and pools.

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