

# Marine Mammals in Captivity

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The public display industry captures many species of marine mammals from the wild, especially whales and dolphins. The Humane Society of the United States believes that these animals should not be taken from the wild simply to entertain and amuse people, for a number of reasons.

## **Life in the Wild**

The very nature of these animals makes them uniquely unsuited to confinement. In the wild, whales and dolphins live in large groups (called pods), often in tight family units. Family bonds often last many years. In some species, they last for a lifetime.

Whales and dolphins travel long distances each day, sometimes swimming in a straight line for a hundred miles, other times remaining in a certain area for hours or days, moving several miles along a coastline and then turning to retrace their path. These marine mammals can dive up to several hundred meters and stay underwater for up to half an hour. They spend only 10 to 20% of their time at the surface.

The sea is to whales and dolphins much as the air is to birds—a three-dimensional environment, where they can move up and down and side to side. But whales and dolphins don't stop to perch. They never come to shore, as do seals and sea lions. Whales and dolphins are always swimming, even when they "sleep." They are "voluntary breathers," conscious of every breath they take. They are always aware, and always moving. Understanding this, it is difficult to imagine the tragedy of life in no more than a tiny swimming pool.

## **Life in Captivity**

Life for captive whales and dolphins is nothing like a life in the sea. It is almost impossible to maintain a family group in captivity. Tanks only allow a few strokes in any direction before coming to a wall. Because tanks are shallow, the natural tendencies of whales and dolphins are reversed—they spend more than half their time at the tank's surface.

This unnatural situation can cause skin problems. In addition, in captive killer whales (orcas), it is the probable cause of dorsal fin collapse, as without the support of water, gravity pulls these tall appendages over as the whale matures. Collapsed fins are experienced by all captive male orcas and many captive female orcas, who were either captured as juveniles or who were born in captivity. However, they are observed in only about 1% of orcas in the wild.

In a tank, the environment is monotonous and limited in scope. Sonar clicks, the method by which individuals define their surroundings, have limited utility in such an environment. These animals, who are perpetually aware, have nothing like the varied stimulation of their natural environment. In perpetual motion, they are forced into literally endless circles. Life for these animals is a mere shadow of what it was in the wild.

### **The Problem**

What must life be like for these complex, gregarious, three-dimensional creatures who suddenly find themselves in a comparatively bland, isolated, two-dimensional enclosure? And what of the capture process itself? It violently disrupts social groups, splits up families, and snatches individual animals from the water; it is a completely unnatural event. Capture stress can be very severe and even fatal. And the act of capturing betrays the trust of dolphins in particular, who often come to play at the bow of the capture boat, only to be netted and hauled aboard, an incredibly traumatic ending to an innocent and joyous behavior.

At first look, a whale or dolphin show may seem exciting, even for the animals. But when you look past the show to the high mortality rates and stress-related causes of death in captive whales and dolphins, the effects of captivity suggest a far harsher reality. The public display of whales and dolphins in marine parks and aquaria is waning in Europe and Canada, but it is still prevalent in the United States and is increasing in developing countries, particularly those in Asia.

Although seals and sea lions may breed readily in captivity, only a few species are held in numbers large enough to sustain a breeding population. Whales and dolphins, on the other hand, do not breed well in captivity. Some species have never produced surviving offspring, while the calves of others suffer high mortality rates. Therefore, many of the marine mammals on public display in the world still come from the wild.

The U.S. government allows the capture of wild marine mammals for public display, justifying this exemption from the Marine Mammal Protection Act's prohibition of exploitation and harassment by contending that public display serves educational and conservation purposes. However, experience has proven that public display does not effectively educate the public and that profit is the main motive for conducting traumatic and stressful captures. For a marine mammal, tanks are prisons. The monotonous, confined life of animals in captivity is a mere shadow of what life was like for them in the wild. The HSUS believes that animals in bare tanks do not present a realistic image of natural behaviors or natural habitats. Marine mammals are best protected by cleaning up and protecting their natural environment, not by removing them from it.