

# Tilikum: Tale of an Imprisoned Orca

Can you imagine being separated from your family and forced to live the rest of your life in a concrete prison—all to provide someone with “so-called” entertainment? That’s exactly what life is like for orcas at marine parks.



Orcas in the ocean, swimming free.

In the ocean, orcas spend their whole lives in their mothers’ family **pod** and swim up to 150 miles a day. At marine parks, these intelligent, sensitive animals are confined to a tank that, for you and me, would be equivalent to the size of a bathtub. Orcas would have to swim back and forth more than 4,300 times in the largest tank at SeaWorld Orlando in order to cover the same distance that they would in a single day in the ocean!

At marine parks, they are forced to perform tricks for food and many have been torn away from their families after having been shuttled between parks. The stress of **imprisonment** likely weakens their immune systems, causing many to die at a younger age than they might have in the ocean.

Tilikum, a male orca, was taken from his ocean home when he was just a baby and held at marine parks for more than 30 years.

At Sealand of the Pacific, a marine park in Canada, trainers deprived him of food in order to make him do tricks, and he was forced to perform eight times a day, seven days a week. The constant stress and exhaustion gave him stomach ulcers.

At the close of business each day, he was locked inside a tiny tank with two other, incompatible orcas for more than 14 hours until the park reopened the next morning. The other orcas, Haida and Nootka, often attacked him.

In 1991, a Sealand trainer fell into the pool and was mauled by all three orcas. Tilikum finally pulled her to the bottom of the tank, where she drowned. After that, Sealand closed and put Tilikum, the largest orca in captivity, up for sale.



Tilikum with a collapsed dorsal fin at SeaWorld.



Following the last trainer's death, Tilikum was kept confined to tiny enclosures in which he could barely turn around. He floated listlessly in the water for hours at a time, which is never seen in free orcas.

SeaWorld quickly purchased him for its **breeding** program. He was so distressed by his life in confinement that he often chewed on metal gates and his concrete tank until his teeth were completely worn down. He also sometimes acted aggressively toward his trainers and eventually took two more human lives.

After a year in isolation, Tilikum was forced to perform again. SeaWorld continued to allow trainers to swim with orcas behind the scenes and interact with them in shallow areas without any safety barriers.

Tilikum is not the only orca who has become aggressive as a result of all the stress that they endure in the small tanks at SeaWorld. The park's records contain more than 100 incidents of orca aggression toward SeaWorld trainers.

Many of these incidents led to human injuries. Aggression toward humans and among orcas is nearly non-existent in nature, but the constant stress of living in incompatible social groupings in minuscule tanks causes some orcas to lash out.

Tilikum died in a barren tank on January 6, 2017, at SeaWorld, far away from the vast ocean, where he should have been swimming alongside his family members.

Other orcas are still suffering in SeaWorld's concrete tanks. But there is hope: People around the world are recognizing that orcas and other cetaceans do not belong in captivity. They're pledging not to go to SeaWorld or any other marine parks until they stop using orcas for entertainment and retire them to **seaside sanctuaries**.