

Making Captive Orcas Extinct

[Katie Dow](#) December 2015

I saw orcas in a marine park in British Columbia when I was a child. My memories of it now are impressionistic – the bright blue of the chlorinated pools, the glossy black and white markings of the orcas, the oohs and aahs of the crowd not dissimilar to those you hear at a fireworks show. Afterwards, my mum used to tell the story of how my seven-year-old eyes had been out on stalks, because when we went downstairs to look through the tank's glass walls, one orca's penis was visible. I vaguely remember being confused by this long pink thing in the water, such a contrast to its owner's monochrome body. It was like my dumb surprise the first time I saw an animal bleeding: so, animals' blood is red, too!

In the UK, where people are known to care about animals to the point of irrationality, [dolphinariums](#) became morally unacceptable during the 1980s. Vocal campaigns to free captive dolphins and boycott aquariums that had dolphins, along with new legislation that made dolphinariums financially unviable led to the closure of the last captive dolphin display in the early 90s. The multiple [reasons](#) why captivity is cruel are, for many, obvious. But, they are not obvious everywhere and plenty of people, including Brits on holiday like my mum and me back in the late 80s, do go and see orcas and other dolphins (despite being known as killer whales, orcas are in fact a type of dolphin) at aquariums and marine parks in other countries, including the SeaWorld franchise in the United States.

The documentary film *Blackfish* (dir. Gabriela Cowperthwaite, 2013) has done much to vividly inform those who weren't already aware of the arguments against captivity, which entails dolphins being violently captured and separated from their pods, kept in tiny spaces alongside strangers, forced to perform for their keep and susceptible to poor health and much shorter lives than they would have in the wild. By centring the film on the killing of SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau by the orca Tilikum, the film points out the consequences of orca captivity not only for the orcas, but also for humans. It argues that keeping orcas in captivity is so traumatising that it provokes them into violence against their human keepers. Though it is sympathetic towards Brancheau and other individual trainers, the film's message about which species is to blame for such violence is very clear.



Blackfish was released two years ago, and it struck a nerve. Its message has gained momentum with highly effective calls by celebrities including Harry Styles to end the capture and display of dolphins and whales at SeaWorld. Business reports show an 84% drop in SeaWorld's earnings in 2015 compared to 2014, which has been interpreted as a direct result of *Blackfish* and Styles' comments. SeaWorld's response to *Blackfish* and its attendant barrage of criticism has been a PR firestorm, but it has hit a bum note. The 'nothing to see here' sugary-sweet tone of its recent

advertising demonstrates a failure to grasp the fact that the cultural tide has turned against it. In a time of generalised anxiety, including that about the state of the environment, people need reassurance that some wild spaces remain and that humans are not always or only trying to master and profit from nature. Probably – hopefully – it is too late for SeaWorld anyway, but Disneyfying captive orcas certainly won't make them more appealing in an Anthropocene age.

That this is the end of the line for SeaWorld seems all the more likely now that a [ruling](#) by the California Coastal Commission means they will have to [end their captive breeding programme](#), at least in San Diego. Preventing SeaWorld from breeding captive orcas has been a specific aim of Gabriela Cowperthwaite, *Blackfish*'s director. Before the ruling was made, she said that a decision to stop the programme would be '[drastically progressive](#)', arguing that stopping the breeding programme 'would mean that the whales currently at SeaWorld would be the last it will ever have in captivity'.

Others agree with Cowperthwaite that stopping breeding is an important way of undoing the damage of captivity – and preventing future generations from being born into it. For example, the popular new online magazine for animal lovers, [The Dodo](#), has a section dedicated to SeaWorld and published a [listicle](#) of reasons why captive orca breeding programmes are bad. At the end of the list, they have a pledge for visitors to the site promising never to visit SeaWorld which had, at the time of writing, secured more than 1.2 million signatures. The Dodo's list of reasons for stopping SeaWorld's breeding programme include the fact that captive orcas – or, at least, the females – are often bred young (animal rights group Peta has compared the latest SeaWorld orca to give birth, at nine years old, to a human teen mum) and within a [small genetic pool](#), which includes Tilikum, the infamous star of *Blackfish*. They point out that orcas struggle to breed in captivity, leading to a high number of stillbirths. The Dodo also condemns the fact that the breeding programme uses [artificial insemination](#), which they criticise as being counter to orcas' natural behaviour, though the main sticking point seems to be the [bizarre spectacle](#) of interspecies sexual contact that the artificial insemination procedure requires, which is replicated in farms, studs and zoos across the world. More generally, the captive breeding programme at SeaWorld has been [criticised](#) by marine biologists and animal rights campaigners as a cheap, and even profitable, way for the company to keep up its stocks of orcas for display. But, as SeaWorld point out, breeding new orcas does at least mean that they no longer capture them from the wild, which is highly traumatic for both the captured animals and those they leave behind (and indeed any collateral damage caused by the capture).



So, on the one hand, the argument is simply about cutting off the supply of orcas to keep in captivity. But, still, there's something about this that doesn't feel like a straightforward moral victory to me (if indeed such a thing exists). It's partly because not all the breeding that goes on at SeaWorld is through artificial insemination. If the argument is that these orcas should be allowed a more natural way of life, wouldn't that include living amongst other orcas, with which they might breed? And what about the practicalities – are SeaWorld going to have to keep male and female orcas apart? Or will they have to sterilise them? Would the sterilisation process entail suffering? Is orca sterilisation part of a marine mammal veterinarian's repertoire? SeaWorld have

argued against the California Coastal Commission ruling that orcas have a right to breed. Putting aside the double-think that allows SeaWorld to think they have the moral authority to talk of cetacean rights for a moment, do they nonetheless have a point, that what's required to prevent these orcas from breeding may be crueller than allowing it? But of course, the problem not only concerns the adults, but also the resultant calves. According to the argument against captive breeding, such calves would be better off never being conceived than living a life in captivity.

In this case, the ethics of orca captivity, the ethics of captive breeding programmes, the ethics of banning and the ethics of making a serious intervention into the reproductive lives of a group of animals are in taut tension. The moral problems that captivity creates are intractable; there's no good way to undo the fact that 58 orcas are living in captivity and are now so physically dependent and habituated to it that they would be unable to fend for themselves in the wild. This intractability is exacerbated when we look to nature to guide our ethical treatment of animals and resolve such moral problems. Not only is nature as slippery as the water that runs off an orca's monochrome skin, but animals that have been kept in captivity for many years irrevocably lose their own sense of what is natural. This is the tragic irony of what it takes to bring humans face to face with wild animals.

SeaWorld also justify their captive breeding programme as providing great insights into cetacean reproductive biology, which would be nigh on impossible in the wild. The question of why we particularly need to understand cetacean reproductive biology remains open, though. It is one thing to learn about human reproductive biology in order to help people who are infertile or to prevent and treat congenital diseases, but who really benefits from a greater understanding of how cetaceans reproduce? Certainly, campaigners for cetacean conservation and rights might like to add factoids about how whales and dolphins reproduce and care for their young to their lists of reasons why they are awesome creatures which need saving, and what we currently know about cetacean parenting does lend a warm, fuzzy humanising glow to these animals, but I'm not convinced of the value of further anthropomorphism of this species at this point. And, given that this knowledge is gathered in the artificial conditions of captive breeding, I wonder what scientific value it has too.

Rather than learning about the reproductive biology of orcas, wouldn't the best way to help them reproduce be to leave their habitats as healthy and undisturbed as possible? This is a question that can be reflected back onto humans. So, while I believe that there is a strong moral argument for allowing infertile, LGBT and single individuals access to assisted reproductive technologies to help them conceive, we also have to ask why more biomedical attention hasn't been paid to the causes of infertility in the first place. In other words, rather than assuming that infertility in Western countries is caused by women 'delaying' childbirth and that the obvious way to help infertile couples to have a child is through IVF, why hasn't more effort been put into understanding and preventing infertility itself, including the kinds of environmental conditions that endanger human fertility?

Whales and dolphins have a great deal of cultural meanings in the contemporary Western world, most of them positive. They are also poster animals for animal rights and conservation and for environmental movements. This is epitomised in the argument against commercial whaling, which was not an instantly successful one, much as it might seem a no-brainer today. One of the effects of whaling was the serious endangerment of many cetacean species – although orcas are in fact [not classified as endangered](#) because not enough is known about them. The potential or inevitable extinction of certain species that endangerment represents has proved an effective moral argument against the more egregious actions of humans in the natural world, yet animal conservation also unfortunately reminds us that there is a fundamental tension between the requirements of humans and other animals, at least in a 'developed' world. Given the importance of endangerment in campaigns for humans to treat cetaceans better, it is a little ironic that, in stopping the captive breeding programme at SeaWorld, what Cowperthwaite, [Peta](#), The Dodo and others are arguing for is to make captive orcas extinct. In this scenario, the captive orcas of SeaWorld and other marine parks are the sacrificial lambs of the cetacean world, dying for our sins against nature and reminding us of our wrongdoing towards other species so that we might become better people. As Gabriela Cowperthwaite argues, stopping captive breeding of orcas and releasing the remaining captive orcas into sea sanctuaries 'would not only be seminal, it would be culture-shaping'.

More broadly, the focus on breeding in this case points to the potency of reproduction in moral arguments, whatever the species, and to the way in which reproduction often comes to represent ultimate beginnings and endings. But it also shows the different semiotic and moral valences of reproduction, which can become more apparent when looking at other species. SeaWorld has been painted by animal rights campaigners and conservationists as treating orcas as commodities, all the more valuable because they produce new stock by themselves through breeding. This way of thinking about reproduction would not be appropriate in humans – though it was prevalent in American slavery – and this in a sense is the point, that captive breeding programmes force us to think not only about how far we should intervene in other animals' lives, but where exactly we draw the line that separates one species from another and what is at stake when we do.