

Miami Herald

Contrary to the naysayers, Lolita could have survived in freedom / Opinion

AUGUST 30, 2023

BY CHRIS DEROSE

OP-ED



Lolita the killer whale swimming at the Miami Seaquarium on Wednesday, August 30, 2017, in Key Biscayne.
DAVID SANTIAGO dsantiago@elnuevoherald.com

Though rare, Lolita would not have been the first orca to be released back into the wild. Unfortunately, she died on Aug. 18, before the plan was realized.

Keiko, the orca featured in the movie “Free Willy,” is perhaps the most famous. Keiko lived in the wild for five years before his passing.

More recently, a formerly captive orca from Russia was spotted hunting and playing with a pod of other orcas, proving that reacclimating to life in the wild is possible for these majestic creatures, despite what uninformed naysayers would have you believe.

For more than half a century, Lolita — Toki — captured from Washington’s Puget Sound in 1970, was a tourist attraction at the Miami Seaquarium for 53 years. She lived, in isolated captivity, in the world’s smallest orca tank. A 17-page report released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture detailed the many problems with

Lolita's enclosure — and the Seaquarium, in general — including “critical” issues with the pools and enclosures, sick and injured animals, and poor water quality.

Lolita was fed rotten fish, which was making her sick, and forced to perform while injured, all against the medical advice of the attending veterinarian.

It's true that being set free after decades of imprisonment can come with challenges. But those challenges don't compare to the conditions under which orcas in captivity live. Many suffer not only physical ailments but mental health issues, such as depression and psychosis, from living in a space that, for them, is equivalent in size to a bathtub.

Orcas are social creatures by nature, traveling in pods, but when in captivity, are left isolated. At one time, Lolita shared her enclosure with another orca named Hugo. However, Hugo died in 1980 from a brain aneurysm after repeatedly slamming himself into the glass walls of the enclosure.

Research published in 2019 in the peer-reviewed Journal of Veterinary Behavior notes:

“The scientific data on how both wild-caught and captive-born orcas fare in captivity are increasingly robust in demonstrating that they cannot thrive under artificial circumstances in concrete tanks. In captivity, orcas exhibit a wide range of abnormal behaviors and often die at an early age from infections and other health conditions that are uncommon in a wild setting.”

The paper concludes that, “Orcas are poor candidates for maintenance in captivity,” yet they are the third most common marine mammal found there. Currently, there are 55 orcas living in captivity worldwide, 29 of which were born there and have never known freedom.

How do we, as a society, allow this?

The story of Lolita's life is tragic and heartbreaking. She spent more than five decades in solitary confinement, forced to perform for humans. Her life was marked by isolation, loneliness and a lack of mental and physical stimulation.

Her story underscores the inherent cruelty of keeping such highly intelligent and socially complex creatures in captivity solely for human entertainment.

It's past time for us to address how we treat these sentient beings, acknowledge the ethical implications of our actions and take a strong, hard look in the mirror.

Let's not let Lolita's death be in vain.

Chris DeRose is the founder and president of Last Chance for Animals, an international non-profit organization dedicated to eliminating animal exploitation through education, investigations, legislation and media attention.