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SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLE FOR THE MODERN FAMILY

CONNECTION: KILLING THE BLACKFISH. **SPOTLIGHT:** CBS' BRANDON MC MILLAN ON LIFE AND BEING "LUCKY". **PASADO SAFE HEAVEN:** A LITTLE SANCTUARY THAT IS DOING BIG THINGS FOR ANIMALS. **HOLISTIC VET:** THOSE ITCHY HOT SPOTS. **BEHIND THE LABEL:** TREATS.

The
RELATIONSHIP
issue

KILLING THE KILLER WHALES

FROM SHAMU TO BLACKFISH: THE HARSH REALITY OF ANIMAL CAPTIVITY

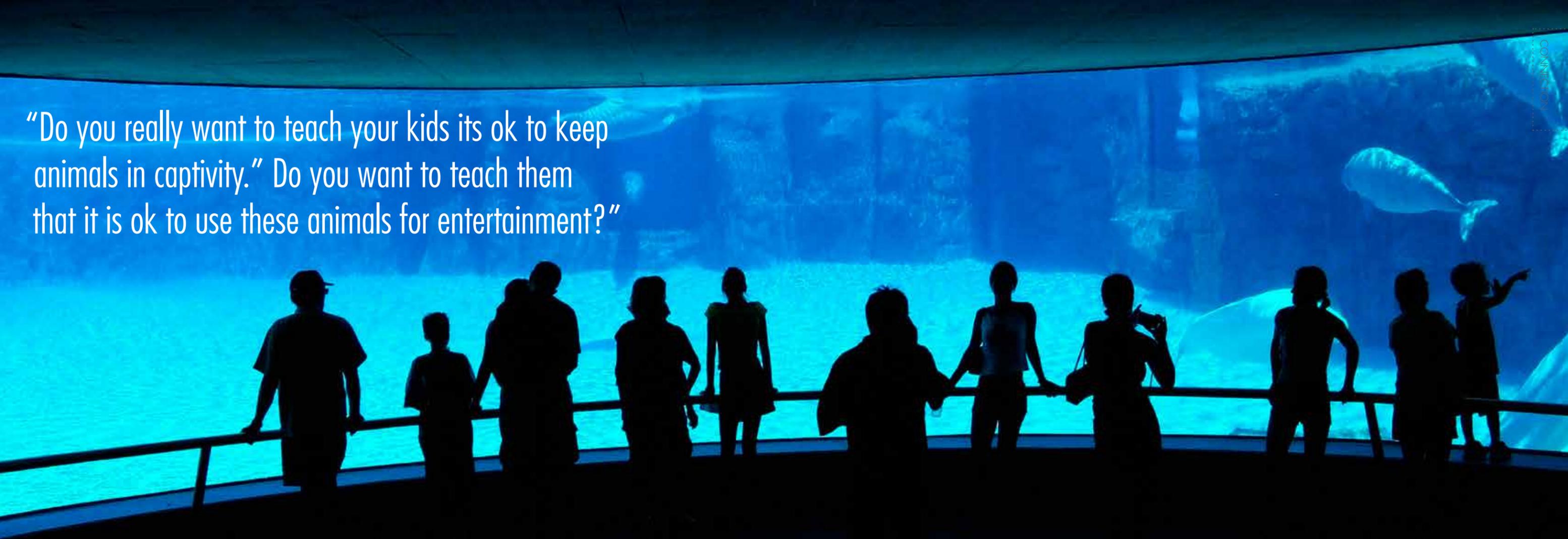
By Garrett Smith

Remember the day your Mom, or Dad told you that you were going to SeaWorld to see Shamu? You had no idea it was a possibility, until that moment. Your unconscious dream became a reality in a matter of seconds. You were headed to see a real live killer whale, a whale who even did tricks! Shamu was the first orca to survive more than thirteen months in captivity and the star of a popular killer whale show at SeaWorld in San Diego in the mid-sixties. Over the years, well over 70 orcas have been taken from the Pacific Ocean for the same purpose: entertainment.

Animal captivity has been a daunting and uncensored

subject for years. From activists, to zoologists, to politicians, to the general public, many people have been making their voice heard on the subject, but a clear resolution has yet to be found. Since the premiere of the critically acclaimed documentary *Blackfish* on CNN last October, animal captivity has been a very hot topic. Especially, in regards to the captivity of the film's stars, orcas, more commonly known as killer whales.

The documentary explores the real cost of "captivity entertainment". It revisits the four deadly incidents that have been the result of an aggressive killer whale and the misfortune >>



“Do you really want to teach your kids its ok to keep animals in captivity.” Do you want to teach them that it is ok to use these animals for entertainment?”

of their trainers. However in parallel, it also exposes the live captures which started the industry; the physical and social stresses the animals endure; the separation of calves from their mothers; and the aggression that sadly occurs between killer whales and their trainers. “At the end of the day trainers get to go home to their families, they get to eat what they want to eat, do what they want to do, sleep where they want to sleep. These animals don’t. They are put on a schedule that we decide; they really are animal slaves to our entertainment industry,” says Dean Gomersall, ex-SeaWorld trainer and marine conservationist seen in *Blackfish*.

A SAD REALITY

Most people may not know that killer whales are very intelligent animals. With the second largest brain of all marine mammals, killer whales have shown capacities in problem solving, memory retention, and understanding symbolic language.

There are three main groups of orcas - Resident, Transient, and Offshore. These three groups have very different diets, languages, hunting techniques, and behavioral methods. Within these groups there are pods, or families of killer whales that learn and speak a dialect unique to their pod. Similar to how there are a multitude of dialects spoken between friends and family throughout the US, even though English is the primary language. For orcas to have the capacity to do such a thing is simply remarkable.

“They [SeaWorld] think that they can throw all of these killer whales in a pool, but none of them speak the same language. They don’t have the same dialect. It’s like kidnapping a young American and throwing him in the middle of China. How would you feel?” says Gomersall. “The extreme stress that you would feel in that situation is the same stress these orcas feel. You could see the desperation in their eyes, how sad they were.” This, according to Gomersall, has led to shortened life spans, vulnerability to disease, and violence towards cage-mates and trainers.

Although, it is not solely the unique social structures that are stirring aggression for these captive mammals, it is the size of their habitats. It is conclusive that man-made tanks are not conducive environments for orcas. Wild orcas are known to swim up to 100 miles a day; meanwhile captive orcas are forced to do a few laps in their 48-foot long tanks. One can only imagine the repressed energy the orcas build up daily.

FROM ENTERTAINMENT TO EDUCATION

When asked about the future of zoos and aquariums, Gomersall sees the opportunity to evolve from shows into real education saying, “ Many animal captivity programs have excellent animal rescue initiatives. If only they could teach true education that is based in actual science, not theme-park science. And stop the breeding of large animals in captivity, like whales, seals, sea lions, walruses, elephants, etc...” He

proceeds to preach about the ingenuity of sea pens, an ocean cove cornered off with nets, where they retire whales under supervision, and how it should be adopted by all parks.

“The way to learn about wild animals is to see them in the wild,” says Adam Roberts, newly nominated Born Free USA CEO. “Wildlife safaris, whale watching tours. If it’s not possible to see them in the wild, then at least to look at films, books, the internet - images of wild animals living free. This is infinitely more educational than seeing animals clinging to life in unnatural settings that are dangerous for both animals and people. Captivity cannot teach people about wild animals since they, by definition, should be living in the wild.”

HOW FAR WILL THE BLACKFISH EFFECT GO?

“Perhaps the most significant meaning of the *Blackfish* documentary is that it brought these important animal welfare issues to the general public, not just to animal advocates already familiar with the cruelty involved in commercial captivity,” Roberts concedes. One hundred and fifty nine captive orcas have died since the animals were captured for public display in the 1960s. All of them died before reaching the midpoint of their life expectancy. There are four total incidents of human deaths resulting from orcas. The orcas involved in these incidents were all in captivity. It is known that no killer whale in the wild has killed a human, nor has there been any documentation of a killer whale killing another of it’s kind.

The question now is: what will happen next?

How can you help?

- Decide not to take part in shows that display wild animals in captivity
- Educate yourself and your family about the negative consequences of keeping animals in captivity
- Take a trip to see wild animals in their habitat (wildlife safari, whale watching tours etc.) or watch documentaries and online eco-tours
- Volunteer or donate to organizations that work to protect animal welfare
- Write a letter to your representatives to ask to end wild animal captivity



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