The Dangers of Marine Mammals in Captivity

A Timeline of Injuries and Deaths to People, Dolphins and Whales

The recent deaths of SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau and Spanish trainer Alexis Martinez, both thrashed by SeaWorld orcas within two months of each other, illuminates an unpopular truth: that when it comes to marine mammals in captivity, history is bound to repeat itself. Since 1991 four people have died at the hands of orcas in captivity, and there are dozens of others that have nearly died over the last forty years. When we subjugate these animals for our amusement, despite their consistent protesting behavior, it says more about our intelligence than it does theirs.

In the history of mankind not one orca has killed a human in the wild, but Tilikum, a 12,000-pound orca in captivity, has been implicated in three deaths in his lifetime. As the death and injury toll continues to rise at marine mammal parks around the world, we need to think seriously about what is being learned through the amusement shows that are responsible for almost all of the accidents. The very same behaviors demonstrated at marine parks are illegal in nature. It should come as no surprise that Florida has a growing problem with harassment of marine mammals in the wild, when they also have more live dolphin shows than any other state.

There are just as many, if not more examples of marine mammals becoming seriously injured or killed in captivity. Among the tragic accidents illustrated here – and this is by no means a comprehensive list – repeat behaviors and recurring frequent deaths are clear indicators that this will continue to happen unless we rethink the role of these wild animals in captivity.

“There is about as much educational benefit to be gained in studying dolphins in captivity as there would be studying mankind by only observing prisoners held in solitary confinement.” -Jacques Cousteau
April 1971
Orca: Shamu
Public Relations Secretary Annette Eckis is tossed off the back of 5 year old female Shamu while riding her for a publicity stunt. Shamu rams her around the tank, refusing to release her. When Eckis is finally able to exit the pool Shamu seizes her leg and will not let go. Eckis suffers lacerations, puncture wounds and received 200 stitches below the waist. Eckis is later told that no one had ever ridden Shamu without a wetsuit (she was in a bikini for publicity’s sake) and no women had ever ridden Shamu.1

*SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

1970's
Orca: Kianu
Trainer Jeff Pulaski is thrown off by young female Kianu and chased out of the tank.1

1970’s
Orca: Hugo (2nd incident)
Young male Hugo breaks an observation window, causing significant water loss, and slices off the end of his nose.3

Miami Seaquarium / AMMPA

May 1977
Orca: Orky II (2nd incident)
Ten year old male, Orky II, pins trainer Jill Stratton to the bottom of the tank and holds her underwater for four minutes. Stratton nearly drowns.1

Maineland of the Pacific / Closed

February 1984
Orca: Kandu V
Seven year old female Kandu V takes trainer Joanne Hay in her mouth and pins her against a wall during a live performance.5

SeaWorld / San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

November 1987
Orca: Orky II (3rd incident)
Five-ton male Orky crashes down on his trainer, John Sillick during a performance. Sillick nearly dies from sever fractures to both hips, pelvis, ribs and legs. After six reconstructive surgeries in fourteen months, Sillick can walk with limited activity.5

SeaWorld / San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

During a four month period in 1987, fourteen trainers are injured by animals at SeaWorld San Diego. Trainers are ordered to stay out of all orca pools for six months. Three SeaWorld officials, including the president, are fired in December.7

November 1984
Orca: Kandu V (2nd incident)
Female Kandu grabs the legs of her trainer Georgia Jones during a live performance, then releases the trainer unhurt.1

SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

November 1986
Orca: Kandu V (3rd incident)
Female Kandu holds trainer Mark Beeler against a wall during a live performance.1

SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

March 1987
Orca: Shamu, Kandu V (4th incident)
A six-ton orca grabs trainer Jonathan Smith and carries him to the bottom of the tank. When he is released at the surface, bleeding, a second whale slams into him. Both whales continue to drag him underwater. Smith escapes with a ruptured kidney, lacerations to his liver and severe cuts.1

SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

1980
During a labor strike that lasts 41 days, four dolphins die because they refused to accept food from anyone but their handlers. The official causes of the deaths include: adrenal exhaustion, stress, starvation, dehydration and emaciation.

Montreal Aquarium

1970’s
Orca: Nepo
Trainer Dave Worcester is dragged to the bottom of the pool by the young male, Nepo.1

Miami Seaquarium / AMMPA

1970’s
Orca: Orky II
Identified male trainer is seized by the leg and held at the bottom of the pool until he loses consciousness.2

Maineland of the Pacific / Closed

1970’s
Orca: Hugo
Young male Hugo closes his mouth on trainer Chris Christiansen's head. Christiansen receives seven stiches in his cheeks.2

Miami Seaquarium / AMMPA

1970’s
Orca: Kianu
Trainer Jeff Pulaski is thrown off by young female Kianu and chased out of the tank.1

1970's
Orca: Hugo
Trainer Marc Stratton nearly drowns.

1980
A child hugs Kandu V, an orca that has been involved in six violent incidents.
During 1989 to 1994, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) receives more than a dozen reports of injuries (at least two per year in the U.S. alone) to people who participated in Swim with the Dolphins sessions, ranging from a cracked sternum to broken arms, lacerations and shock. Broken bones are repeatedly described as the result of "accidental bumps."

### August 1989

**Orca: Kandu V**

Kandu V charges at another orca, Corky II, with her mouth during a live show, misses, and hits the wall. The blow severs an artery near her jaw and causes her to bleed profusely. After 45-minute hemorrhage, Kandu V dies.7

**Orca: Kandu IV**

Noorke drags head trainer Steve Hunter into the pool by his leg after a attempt to retrieve a tourist's watch. Hunter is rescued by staff. SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

### 1987-1990

A number of complaints are reported to the USDA against Ocean World, including complaints that three dolphins had been held in a tank the size of a backyard pool, dolphins had been forced to swim in a pool laced with paint, and overchlorinated water was burning dolphins' skin.8

### 1989

**A number of complaints are reported to the USDA against Ocean World, including complaints that three dolphins had been held in a tank the size of a backyard pool, dolphins had been forced to swim in a pool laced with paint, and overchlorinated water was burning dolphins' skin.**

### June 1987

**Orca: Kandu V**

Kandu, a three-ton orca, lands on trainer Joanne Weber during a show, misses, and hits the wall. The blow severs an artery near her jaw and causes her to bleed profusely. After 45-minute hemorrhage, Kandu V dies.7

**Orca: Kandu IV**

Noorke drags head trainer Steve Hunter into the pool by his leg after a attempt to retrieve a tourist's watch. Hunter is rescued by staff. SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

### 1989

**A number of complaints are reported to the USDA against Ocean World, including complaints that three dolphins had been held in a tank the size of a backyard pool, dolphins had been forced to swim in a pool laced with paint, and overchlorinated water was burning dolphins' skin.**

### June 1987

**Orca: Kandu V**

Kandu, a three-ton orca, lands on trainer Joanne Weber during a show, misses, and hits the wall. The blow severs an artery near her jaw and causes her to bleed profusely. After 45-minute hemorrhage, Kandu V dies.7

**Orca: Kandu IV**

Noorke drags head trainer Steve Hunter into the pool by his leg after a attempt to retrieve a tourist's watch. Hunter is rescued by staff. SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

### 1989

**A number of complaints are reported to the USDA against Ocean World, including complaints that three dolphins had been held in a tank the size of a backyard pool, dolphins had been forced to swim in a pool laced with paint, and overchlorinated water was burning dolphins' skin.**

### June 1987

**Orca: Kandu V**

Kandu, a three-ton orca, lands on trainer Joanne Weber during a show, misses, and hits the wall. The blow severs an artery near her jaw and causes her to bleed profusely. After 45-minute hemorrhage, Kandu V dies.7

**Orca: Kandu IV**

Noorke drags head trainer Steve Hunter into the pool by his leg after a attempt to retrieve a tourist's watch. Hunter is rescued by staff. SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

### 1989

**A number of complaints are reported to the USDA against Ocean World, including complaints that three dolphins had been held in a tank the size of a backyard pool, dolphins had been forced to swim in a pool laced with paint, and overchlorinated water was burning dolphins' skin.**

### June 1987

**Orca: Kandu V**

Kandu, a three-ton orca, lands on trainer Joanne Weber during a show, misses, and hits the wall. The blow severs an artery near her jaw and causes her to bleed profusely. After 45-minute hemorrhage, Kandu V dies.7

**Orca: Kandu IV**

Noorke drags head trainer Steve Hunter into the pool by his leg after a attempt to retrieve a tourist's watch. Hunter is rescued by staff. SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

### 1989

**A number of complaints are reported to the USDA against Ocean World, including complaints that three dolphins had been held in a tank the size of a backyard pool, dolphins had been forced to swim in a pool laced with paint, and overchlorinated water was burning dolphins' skin.**

### June 1987

**Orca: Kandu V**

Kandu, a three-ton orca, lands on trainer Joanne Weber during a show, misses, and hits the wall. The blow severs an artery near her jaw and causes her to bleed profusely. After 45-minute hemorrhage, Kandu V dies.7

**Orca: Kandu IV**

Noorke drags head trainer Steve Hunter into the pool by his leg after a attempt to retrieve a tourist's watch. Hunter is rescued by staff. SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

### 1989

**A number of complaints are reported to the USDA against Ocean World, including complaints that three dolphins had been held in a tank the size of a backyard pool, dolphins had been forced to swim in a pool laced with paint, and overchlorinated water was burning dolphins' skin.**
July 1999

Orca: Tilikum (2nd incident)

On the morning of July 6th, 1999, a member of the public is found dead in an orca enclosure. The body of Daniel Dukes, 27, is naked and draped over the back of male orca, Tillikum, at SeaWorld Orlando. At 5 tons, the 14 year old male is the largest in captivity and was also involved in a death at Sealand in 1991.

The autopsy report indicates that Dukes was bitten in the groin by Tillikum. Attorney Patricia Sigman claims that SeaWorld is legally liable as it had portrayed the orca as human loving, and as a “huggable stuffed toy”. She goes on to say that an inaccurate image had been given of this whale, when in fact, “he is extremely dangerous.”

November 1998

Orca: Sumar

At six months old, Sumar is attacked by his own mother, Taima during a show. She hits him with her tail and then tosses him onto a trainer platform where she proceeds to pin Sumar down and bite him. Guests are evacuated. Mother and the very young calf are permanently separated after the incident.

July 1999

Orca: Kasatka

Kasatka, a 22 year old female becomes aggressive with her trainer Kenneth Peters, grabs him by the leg and attempts to throw him from the pool during a live show. SeaWorld spokesperson Darla Davis says, “while it is unusual for a whale to bite a trainer, Kasatka is the dominant whale in her pod and will definitely be more aggressive than the other.” Some sources say Kasatka’s behavior was a result of being separated from her daughter.

November 2006

Orca: Kasatka (2nd incident with same trainer)

During a live show trainer Kenneth Peters is launched into the air by 7,000 pound female, Kasatka. Kasatka grabs Peters by his feet, drags him underwater and shakes him violently for nearly a minute, according to OSHA’s official report. Peters then surfaces only to be thrashed again and taken back down to the bottom of the tank where Kasatka lay against him until he went limp. Peters manages to survive with only puncture wounds and a broken foot. OSHA’s inspector writes that “swimming with captive orcas is inherently dangerous, and if someone hasn’t been killed already, it is only a matter of time before it does happen.” OSHA later rescinds the report on the basis that the inspector’s conclusions went beyond the scope of their role.

July 2004

Orca: Ky

Twelve year old male orca Ky attacks his trainer, Steve Aibel, during a live show, belly flopping on top of him, and positioning himself between Aibel and the tank’s exit ramp. The aggression lasts for several minutes before Aibel is rescued.

2002

Inside Edition’s Nancy Glass is struck by a 500 pound dolphin when it leaps and falls short on top of her. Glass suffered permanent partial hearing loss and cervical injury.

July 1995

Orca: Splash

Splash, a 6 year old male, is injured after swimming very fast into a tank gate. His flesh catches on a hinge and rips a gash from his chin to his lip. Splash sinks to the bottom of the tank where two companion orcas, Orkid and Kasatka support him to the surface where he is able to continue breathing until trainers can step in.

July 2002

Orca: Splash (2nd incident), Orkid

Two orcas pull a 28 year old trainer into the tank. The trainer suffers a broken arm.

SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

SeaWorld - Orlando / AZA / AMMPA

SeaWorld - Orlando / AZA / AMMPA

SeaWorld - Orlando / AZA / AMMPA

SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

SeaWorld - San Antonio / AZA / AMMPA

SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA
A marine mammal survey, commissioned by the US Marine Mammal Commission and conducted by UCLA in 2004, finds that more than half of marine mammal workers have been injured by the animals. More than one-third of the injuries are classified as severe - deep wounds, fractures, or requiring stitches.10

January 2008

Dolphin: Annie
An 11 year old bottlenose dolphin named Annie lands on top of three volunteers while attempting to leap over a limbo bar during a Swim with the Dolphin show. All three volunteers are injured and one woman is sent to the hospital.23
Dolphin Academy - Curacao, Netherlands Antilles / EAAM

October 2004
A 49 year old man is hospitalized after jumping into a dolphin tank where a mother and baby dolphin are swimming.16 Miami Seaquarium / AMMPA

2006
A 4 year old dolphin dies from "severe acute trauma and secondary thoracic and abdominal hemorrhage," SeaWorld - Orlando / AZA / AMMPA

October 2007
Orca: Tekoa
An orca crashes into trainer Claudia Vollhardt during rehearsal and drags her to the bottom of the tank, injuring Vollhardt’s right lung and breaking her forearm in two places.22
Loro Parque - Canary Islands, Spain /EAAM

November 2006
Orca: Orkid (2nd incident)
Eighteen year old female Orkid, grabs trainer Brian Rokeach by the leg and drags him to the bottom of the pool where he holds Rokeach for around 30 seconds. Rokeach suffers a torn ligament but is not hospitalized.20
SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

2007
An 11 year old captive bred dolphin dies of acute hemorrhaging. SeaWorld - Orlando / AZA / AMMPA

April 2007
Orca: Orkid (3rd incident)
Orkid knocks her trainer off a low wall while getting a sonogram. Trainer suffers minor injuries. SeaWorld - San Diego / AZA / AMMPA

April 2008
A wild-caught dolphin dies from traumatic cervical vertebal fracture after just four years in captivity. SeaWorld - Orlando / AZA / AMMPA

September 2008
Orca: Freya
Twenty-six year old female Freya pulls her trainer under water and pushes him during a live performance. Marineland - Antibes, France

April 2008
Dolphin: Sharky
Thirty year old female dolphin, Sharky, collides in mid air with another dolphin while leaping during a live show performance. Sharky dies soon afterwards from traumatic head injuries. The other dolphin, Tyler, is moved to veterinary supervision.24, 25
Discovery Cove - Orlando / AMMPA

January 2008
Orca: Halyn
A 2 year old, born in San Antonio, dies of acute necrotizing encephalitis, an inflammation of the brain caused by herpes.11, 12
SeaWorld - San Antonio / AZA / AMMPA

September 2008
Orca: Ku
Captive born, female orca, Ku stops eating on July 23. Two months later she is found dead at the bottom of her tank, her skin inflamed by herpes.26
Nagoya Port Aquarium

October 2008
A 23 year old male dolphin dies from brain hemorrhaging. In 1984 another female, Jeannie, age 24, died of the same cause. Theater of the Sea - Marmarada, Florida / AMMPA

2005
Dolphin: Howard
A 23-year old male dolphin dies from brain hemorrhaging. In 1984 another female, Jeannie, age 24, died of the same cause.
Orca: Tilikum (3rd incident)

During a show in Shamu Stadium, Tilikum grabs trainer Dawn Brancheau in his mouth and drags her underwater. Despite Brancheau’s efforts to escape, Tilikum rams her repeatedly, shakes her violently and holds her jaws, rescuers must go back to retrieve her arm, which was dismembered. Chuck Tompkins, head of animal training at all SeaWorld parks, confirms that “because of Tilikum’s size and involvement in two previous deaths, trainers weren’t supposed to get in the water with him.”

February 2010

Orca: Tilikum and Brancheau, moments before her death.

Funeral services were held for Dawn Brancheau on March 1, 2010.

During a show in Shamu Stadium, Tilikum grabs trainer Dawn Brancheau in his mouth and drags her underwater. Despite Brancheau’s efforts to escape, Tilikum rams her repeatedly, shakes her violently and holds her jaws, rescuers must go back to retrieve her arm, which was dismembered. Chuck Tompkins, head of animal training at all SeaWorld parks, confirms that “because of Tilikum’s size and involvement in two previous deaths, trainers weren’t supposed to get in the water with him.”

SeaWorld - Orlando / AZA / AMMPA

Sources

1. Don C. Reed, Notes from an Underwater Zoo, Dial Press, 1981, p. 250