Denalynn Silkey

Denalynn Silkey graduated from Willowbrook High School where she participated in soccer, bowling, and theatre. Here at NIU, Denalynn is an early childhood education major because she intends to teach kindergarten or first grade, possibly working with children with special needs. She views her essay “Living in a Fishbowl” as a labor of love and spent a great deal of time working on it because she is passionately against Orca captivity.
Living in a Fishbowl

Denalynn Silkey

An eager audience waits as the large animal swims closer and closer to the edge of the tank. They are so excited to be splashed that they are teetering on the edge of their seats. The graceful giant speeds up, and then suddenly with all its might, lifts its tail out of the water and slams it down with amazing power. This animal is an Orca, otherwise known as a killer whale. Many Orcas are kept in aquariums around the world at places such as SeaWorld and other amusement parks. Orcas are large, beautiful whales that can be up to thirty-two feet in length and weigh up to twenty-two thousand pounds (NOAA 1). People have been fascinated by Orcas for hundreds of years because of their large size and striking appearance. Although the only way for most people to see these animals is to visit them in aquariums, keeping Orca whales in captivity can be unhealthy for them both physically and emotionally.

Orcas have certain physical needs, which need to be met in order for their survival. Most people refer to Orcas as “killer whales” because in the wild they are ferocious hunters. While in captivity Orcas seem to be sweet, docile creatures, but when observed in their natural environment, they are highly intelligent and skilled hunters. Orcas have been compared to wolves in the way they hunt because they are known to work as a group in hunting and killing prey (Gold and Mead 137). The fact that Orcas work as a functional and cohesive group illustrates that they are in fact not only social, but also intelligent as well. One specific hunting technique that proves to be useful to Orcas is known as beach hunting. Beach hunting is when Orcas watch for prey close to shore, then charge the prey at incredible speed. Once on shore, they will move their prey’s bodies from side to side until they are back in deeper waters (Dudzinski and Frohoff 46). This technique is just one among many that Orcas use in the wild to catch prey. In captivity, Orcas are unable to put hunting techniques such as beach
hunting to use. As a result, they lose their innate skill to hunt prey (Gold and Mead 91).

Not only are Orcas skilled hunters, they are excellent teachers of their techniques. Young Orcas learn how to beach hunt through watching their parents (Dudzinski and Frohoff 46). When Orcas are held in captivity, there is no reason to teach their young how to hunt because trainers are there to feed them. This may seem insignificant, however Orcas in captivity are losing their natural ability to hunt and teach their offspring the proper techniques to survive in a natural environment. There have been very few cases of Orcas who were in captivity being successfully released into the wild (Gold and Mead 91). As a result of their captivity, they lack the ability to take care of themselves.

The prey Orcas consume in the wild is just as important as their hunting skills. In the wild, Orcas are skillful hunters who eat a wide variety of animals. Orcas have been seen eating sea otters, seals, dolphins and even some larger whales (Gold and Mead 71). Also in the wild, Orcas are able to have a diet that is wide in variety and rich in nutrients, whereas in captivity most of them are fed fish that are already dead. Orcas are found all over the world in every part of the ocean and are the most broadly distributed marine mammals (NOAA 2). With the ocean as an Orca’s natural environment, their traveling options are truly unlimited. Transient Orcas have been known to travel immense distances (NOAA 3). In contrast, an aquarium, no matter how large, is a poor substitute for the Orca’s natural environment.

In the ocean, Orcas are able to swim and dive freely. In the book *Killer Whales*, Ford states, “Traveling whales tend to move at speeds of five to thirteen knots (Ford, Ellis, and Balcomb 29). Killer whales are also known to dive to deep levels. One study of Orca diving behavior found that they reached maximum depths of 330 meters, with the average depth being 250 meters (Baird, Hanson, and Lawrence 262). In contrast, when Orcas are confined to aquariums, they are forced to swim in circles and are largely unable to dive.

In addition to their physical needs, Orcas also have emotional needs. Orca society is complex and intricate just as human society is. Orcas travel in groups known as pods that can vary in size but can contain up to forty or fifty Orcas (NOAA 2). Most pods have a matrilineal line wherein which mothers and calves remain together for life (Dudzinski and Frohoff 52). Dudzinski and Frohoff state, “With
the exception of some human populations, killer whales are the only mammals in which both genders remain with their maternal group for life” (52). The bonds between the members of a pod are strong and evident from the fact that they stay together for life. In contrast, many of the whales that are held in captivity are not related, depriving them of an important social and emotional bond.

The Orca’s social nature extends beyond its individual pod. Orcas from different pods often communicate with each other. There have been occasions when separate pods have joined together in “greeting ceremonies” in which Orcas from two different pods interact with one another in social behaviors, such as vocalizing and swimming together (Ford, Ellis and Balcomb 31). This type of behavior illustrates that Orcas are highly social creatures living in complex societies, which humans cannot fully understand. Because captive Orcas are unable to participate in many social activities, such as greeting ceremonies, they are deprived of many important social interactions.

Perhaps one of the most astounding interactions between Orcas is how they communicate with one another. The capability to communicate is an important skill among intelligent beings. Communication allows one to express his emotions, feelings, and needs. While scientists do not understand exactly what Orcas communicate, they have made significant discoveries regarding their communication. Vocalizing is used to communicate among members of a pod for hunting techniques, but Orcas use squeaks and squawks while socializing with one another as well (Ford, Ellis, and Balcomb 31). The vocalizations Orcas use to communicate are highly specific to their pods (Ford and Ellis 22). Humans are similar in that different regions of the world speak different languages or dialects. Orcas use three different types of vocalization: clicks, whistles, and pulsed calls (NOAA 2). Whistles and pulsed calls are used primarily for communication signals, and clicks are generally used for navigation purposes (Ford and Ellis 22). The ability to selectively use different vocalizations while participating in activities such as hunting and socializing is yet another illustration of the Orca’s intelligence. When Orcas are happy and socializing they use different vocalizations than at other times. Although there is still much to be learned about these animals, Orcas are obviously complex social creatures.

In addition to their vocalizations, Orcas also participate in a variety of other social activities, such as sexual interactions,
spyhopping, tail slapping, flipper slapping, and chasing one another at high speeds (Ford, Ellis, and Balcomb 31). Spyhopping is a when an Orca simply raises its head above water to get a look at the surface (Ford, Ellis, and Balcomb 32). Orcas are also known to engage in sexual activities as a form of socializing with one another (Ford, Ellis, and Balcomb 30). Orcas’ mating habits are not totally understood; however, it is estimated that over the course of twenty-five years, an Orca will give birth every five years (NOAA 1). Since most amusement parks or aquariums do not have many Orcas, captive Orcas are limited in their mate selection.

Another behavior Orcas are known to participate in for social reasons is called beach rubbing. This activity is considered unusual and only done by southern resident Orcas (Ford, Ellis, and Balcomb 31). Beach rubbing is when Orcas rub their bodies on the pebbles at the bottom of shallow water. Some scientists feel that this is a social behavior, although there may be practical reasons for it as well (Ford, Ellis, and Balcomb 310). Orcas that are in captivity are unable to fulfill the social and practical needs necessitated by this practice.

The debate over whether Orcas should be kept in captivity is intensifying as we gain more knowledge of these creatures. Many animal rights activists oppose keeping Orcas in aquariums, but all across the world there are amusement parks that keep Orcas in captivity. Some question what reason these parks could have for keeping such a large and intelligent animal confined in a tank. Many parks claim that educating people about Orcas is necessary to preserving these whales and their environment, and that in order to educate others, they must keep Orcas in captivity (Luck and Jiang 128). Educating people about Orcas is an admirable goal, however education is not a justification for keeping these creatures captive. There is no evidence regarding the educational value of keeping Orcas captive (Luck and Jiang 128). Moreover, people are able to learn about animals without having to see them first-hand. Blue whales are one of the largest creatures on this planet and while they have never been and never could be held in captivity due to their immense size, people know of them without having seen them in person.

The actual reason for keeping Orcas in captivity is clearly not educational, but financial. Places such as SeaWorld attract thousands of people a day from around the country. SeaWorld and other marine parks are multi-million dollar companies, which use Orcas and
dolphins as their main attractions (Luck and Jiang 127). Although they claim to have education as their reason for keeping Orcas captive, SeaWorld’s business is driven by the millions of dollars displaying Orcas generates. SeaWorld’s website lists different shows displaying Orcas such as, “Shamu Rocks, and Shamu Christmas Miracles.” The SeaWorld website makes no mention of these shows’ educational value, but instead lists entertaining features such as multimedia, music, choreography, and even miracles (Sea World, “Shows”). Places like SeaWorld seem to be more interested in putting on grand displays and entertaining shows, rather than in educating people about Orcas and their natural environment.

Keeping Orcas in captivity also shortens their life expectancy. When Orcas are left in their natural habitat, their survival rates are surprisingly long. Some biologists estimate that in the wild male Orcas live fifty to sixty years, and females can live anywhere from eighty to ninety years (Gold and Mead 36). In contrast, SeaWorld’s website states that a male Orca’s life expectancy is thirty years, and a female’s life expectancy is fifty years (Sea World “Killer Whales”). The life expectancy ages SeaWorld offers are much lower than those given for Orcas in their natural environments, perhaps so that when captive Orcas die at a young age, no questions will be raised. The average life expectancy of a captive Orca is twenty-seven years—half of what it is in the wild (Gold and Mead 38). In order to hide this fact, some marine parks have actually passed on the names of dead Orcas to new captives in order to inflate life expectancy rates (Gold and Mead 39). This deceit on the part of aquariums and parks is despicable.

Orcas are magnificent animals whose complexity is not entirely known. Although people all over the world are fascinated by Orcas, few people realize how harmful captivity is to these remarkable creatures. While it may be interesting to see these creatures in person, it must be recognized that Orcas in captivity are not themselves. Confining these creatures strips them of their inherent skills and abilities and forces them to lead an existence that is debilitating and unnatural. While Orcas have not been taken from U.S. waters in forty years (NOAA 4), many parks still breed captive Orcas. Perhaps by gaining increased knowledge and respect for Orcas, aquariums will stop breeding programs and ultimately end the captivity of these amazing animals. Orcas deserve a rich, full life in the wild, not a life of captivity confined in a fishbowl.
Works Cited


**Instructor Jodie Butler's comments:** Denalynn’s paper, “Living in a Fishbowl,” is a fantastic example of an academic research paper. She uses interesting and varied language and sentence structure, sound academic sources, and she clearly and directly delivers the information in an engaging way. Because she organizes the information in such a fluid manner, Denalynn takes the reader easily through a thorough exposition, never straying from her opening thoughts. In doing so, Denalynn demonstrates great control over her ideas. Learning how to
write academically and, especially, learning how to evaluate and integrate sources well, is often quite challenging for new college writers, but Denalynn manages it with grace and skill.