

Blackfish is the story of Tilikum, the killer whale, which shows how SeaWorld and other parks exploited these highly intelligent sea mammals, by capturing young whales and taking them away from their mothers and family pods. The film shows how the mothers and the calves, as well as other family members, screamed for each other when separated and the entire pod would follow the boat carrying young whales captured and taken from their families. The family pod followed until they were just too tired and heartbroken to continue. Males, who live up to 60 years in the wild, spend their entire lives with their mothers, who live to 80 or 90 years old. Separation from the family pod almost never happens. Only in death is a family member lost.

Take it from Ken Balcomb, marine biologist, conservationist and orca advocate: "When you are born into the family, you are always in the family. You don't have a house, or a home, that is your location. The group is your home, and your whole identity is with your group. Aggression between members of a pod almost never occurs in the wild."

I learned about Ken Balcomb, and much of what I now know about captive killer whales, from two articles I read by Tim Zimmermann, who writes for *Outsider* magazine. It is from Zimmermann that I learned all the details of Tilikum's life. He is also one of the brave individuals who worked on Blackfish. One of the men Zimmermann met on his quest to unravel just what happens to whales in captivity, is Ken Balcomb. Balcomb is now 75. His headquarters for his Center for Whale Research is his home, located on San Juan Island, off the coast of Washington State along the shores of Haro Strait. There he is able to study the whales who pass through, and he views them about 80 days of the year. If there is anything to know about orcas, nobody knows more than Balcomb. And for the record, he is one of the good guys, as is Zimmermann.

Killer whales live in family units of 20 to 60 whales, governed by the females of the pod, with the oldest female being the supreme leader. We have learned when a wild animal is taken away from his family, made to perform circus tricks, and incarcerated for years, it will cause them to go insane. When Tilikum was snatched from his home in the wild, and taken to Sealand, this became his destiny.

On February 20 1991, the inevitable disaster happened at Sealand: Keltie Bryne, a part-time trainer and student studying marine biology, was cleaning up at the end of the day after the shows had finished. She slipped halfway into the pool and struggled to get out, but it was too late. The deprived, irritable, depressed, and bored beyond belief killer whales grabbed her. Tilikum was with two females orcas – Haida and Nootka – who had been captured with him. Bryne was a live plaything. The trainers did everything they could to get Bryne out of the water. But what could anyone do? The whales set the rules and they were not going to let her go until the game was over. The game would go on until she no longer struggled. Bryne surfaced twice, screaming each time. She was under the water for ten minutes before she surfaced for the third time. There was no scream. She was dead. Game over.

As Zimmermann reported as he interviewed Sealand's manager: "It was just a tragic accident." Al Bolz, Sealand's manager, told reporters at the time: 'I just can't explain it.'

If Bolz was telling the truth about not being able to explain what had happened, it begs the question, why was someone with no knowledge of orcas a manager running a marine park? If he was lying, management was turning a blind eye to the mistreatment of the whales, and the potential danger that was bound to occur.

As reported by Zimmermann: "Paul Spong, 70 (now 76), director of Orca Lab, in British Columbia – which studies orcas in the wild – did part-time research at Sealand before Tilikum arrived. He is (was) not so befuddled (by what happened to Keltie Bryne). "If you pen killer whales in a small steel tank, you are imposing an extreme level of sensory deprivation on them," he says. 'Humans who are subjected to those same conditions become mentally disturbed.'"

What happened to the marine parks after this incident? Since very few people actually heard about the tragedy, marine parks, especially SeaWorld, continued to grow. And no charges of any kind were filed.

After Keltie Bryne's death, Sealand's owner, Robert Wright, lost interest in the business. He contacted SeaWorld in 1991 and sold Haida, Nootka and Tilikum to them. Sealand closed in 1992.

SeaWorld was aware of what had happened, but Tilikum was a male of breeding age and they had their sights set on breeding killer whales in captivity. SeaWorld was about to get a bonus they didn't know existed. Tilikum had already impregnated Haida and Nootka.

SeaWorld paid a reported sum of around one million dollars for Tilikum. However, it was faced with a dilemma. Should bosses allow trainers in the water with Tilikum and teach him to perform with them?

SeaWorld was, and is, the Cadillac of marine parks. They certainly had mastered sophisticated training methods with plenty of variations in exercises and rewards. The goal was to avoid the whales being over stimulated by something new, as they had been with Keltie Bryne. >

