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**SPLASH!** An orca in its natural habitat in Glacier Bay, Alaska.

# Should Orcas Be Kept in Captivity?

A tragedy at Sea World has reignited a debate about the pros and cons of keeping wild animals in captivity

As long as zoos, aquariums, wildlife parks, and oceanariums have existed, so have debates about whether or not wild animals and sea creatures should be kept in captivity. Those debates were reignited in February when trainer Dawn Brancheau was pulled under the water and killed by a 12,000-pound orca named Tilikum. The tragedy happened at Sea World in Orlando, Florida.

On the morning of February 24, Brancheau stood by the pool as Tilikum performed his routine for adoring fans. Brancheau and Tilikum had done the same show together many times without incident. But on that tragic morning, the audience watched in horror as Tilikum leapt from the water, grabbed Brancheau by her ponytail, and dragged her deep below the water's surface. The next few seconds were the worst in Sea World's history. By the time it was over, Brancheau had lost her life.

Orcas, also called killer whales, are the largest members of the dolphin family. They are easy to train, and performances like the one Tilikum was doing have been done safely thousands of times. Yet Brancheau's

death was a shocking reminder of what can happen when human beings interact with wild animals. After the Sea World tragedy, people started asking, "Should orcas be kept in captivity?"

Forty-two orcas are currently in captivity worldwide. Scientists know very little about these huge sea animals, which are difficult to study in the wild. Understanding orcas helps scientists do a better job of protecting them in nature. It also raises awareness about the dangers that they face, including increasingly polluted oceans.

On the other hand, enclosed habitats can be distressing to wild animals. Some people believe it is cruel to keep them in captivity and away from their natural habitats. **Should orcas be kept in captivity? You decide.** ●



Dawn Brancheau performs with Tilikum in 2009.

**WRITE NOW!** Write a persuasive essay explaining whether or not you think orcas should be kept in captivity. Remember to use supporting details and end with a strong conclusion. Turn to page 20 for tips on how to organize your essay.



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