# SeaWorld responds to questions about captive orcas, 'Blackfish' film

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**(CNN)** -- This week, [CNN will present the premiere of "Blackfish,"](http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/us/cnn-films-blackfish/index.html) a documentary that traces the history of killer whales in captivity leading up to the 2010 killing of SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau by Tilikum, an orca previously associated with the death of two other people.

SeaWorld has been critical of the film, which debuted at the Sundance Film Festival earlier this year, issuing this statement to CNN:

*"Blackfish is billed as a documentary, but instead of a fair and balanced treatment of a complex subject, the film is inaccurate and misleading and, regrettably, exploits a tragedy that remains a source of deep pain for Dawn Brancheau's family, friends and colleagues. To promote its bias that killer whales should not be maintained in a zoological setting, the film paints a distorted picture that withholds from viewers key facts about SeaWorld -- among them, that SeaWorld is one of the world's most respected zoological institutions, that SeaWorld rescues, rehabilitates and returns to the wild hundreds of wild animals every year, and that SeaWorld commits millions of dollars annually to conservation and scientific research. Perhaps most important, the film fails to mention SeaWorld's commitment to the safety of its team members and guests and to the care and welfare of its animals, as demonstrated by the company's continual refinement and improvement to its killer whale facilities, equipment and procedures both before and after the death of Dawn Brancheau."*

SeaWorld declined CNN's requests to be interviewed on camera. However, Vice President of Communications Fred Jacobs agreed to answer some questions about the controversy over the film and about keeping orcas in captivity.

Here are Jacobs' unedited responses to CNN's questions:

**CNN:** In your statement, SeaWorld notes that Blackfish "withholds from viewers key facts about SeaWorld," including that SeaWorld has rescued, rehabilitated, and returned to the wild hundreds of wild animals: Do any of those animals include orcas?

**SeaWorld:** Yes, though killer whales do not beach with the same frequency as other species and when they do it is typically a last ditch effort at survival. Killer whales, like all stranded marine mammals, are generally gravely ill, injured, malnourished, dehydrated, very old or very young, and do not survive long on shore. Nonetheless, we've assisted whales many times, including killer whales. The largest whale to ever be [rescued, rehabilitated and returned](http://www.cnn.com/EARTH/9803/23/gray.whale/) to the wild -- J.J. the orphaned gray whale calf -- was part of our rescue program. (See the [attached paper from a biologist at the Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute](http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2013/images/10/11/blackfish.seaworld.27-03_stewart_papers.pdf) (PDF).) You can read about our role in rescuing killer whales from Barnes Lake in Alaska [here](http://whale.wheelock.edu/archives/whalenet95/0056.html) and our role in rescuing a killer whale named Springer [here](http://seattletimes.com/html/localnews/2003747133_orca14m.html). We also assisted our colleagues at Dolfinarium in Holland with veterinary care and husbandry for an orphaned and hearing-impaired juvenile killer whale [they rescued](http://www.zoochat.com/158/young-orca-rescued-157674/). SeaWorld was part of the team to help [Luna](http://documentarystorm.com/natural-world-great-white-shark-a-living-legend/), as well as a [young killer whale](http://www.chron.com/news/nation-world/article/Baby-killer-whale-beaches-self-along-Mexico-s-1826531.php) stranded near Puerto Vallarta in Mexico. We also are regularly called upon to do[pathology](http://www.adn.com/2013/09/07/3062263/dead-killer-whale-calf-is-getting.html) on beached whales that do not survive.

**CNN:** What kind of rehabilitation and rescue efforts does SeaWorld provide for orcas?

**SeaWorld:**See the answer above. I should stress that the goal of our rescue program is the rehabilitation of an animal in need so that it can be successfully reintroduced to the wild. That occurs hundreds of times each year. Just this week we released a beached common dolphin that was rescued and rehabilitated by our park in San Diego. There are few organizations in the world that rescue more animals than we do: more than 23,000 since the program's inception.

**CNN:**What are the benefits to keeping orcas in captivity?

**SeaWorld:**The primary benefits are identical for any species in any accredited zoological institution: education and science. At SeaWorld more than 11 million people each year (hundreds of millions since our first park opened its gates in 1964) have experienced killer whales in a way that is personal, enriching and inspirational. Learn more [here](http://www.seaworldcares.com/voices-seaworld). It is our hope that every person who has visited SeaWorld leaves with a greater understanding of and appreciation for all the animals we display, including killer whales. I have attached two documents that outline some of our peer-reviewed contributions to the scientific understanding of killer whales. Note that this is just killer whales. We have similar bibliographies for many of the species living at SeaWorld.

**CNN:** Many marine biologists and animal ethicists believe that orcas should not be kept in captivity because they are designed to travel hundreds of miles each day. Do you think the exposure that SeaWorld provides to millions of people who might not otherwise see a killer whale outweighs these concerns about impact of captivity on orcas?

**SeaWorld:**While a killer whale can and occasionally might travel as much as 100 miles in a day, it should be said that swimming that distance is not integral to a whale's health and well-being. It is likely foraging behavior. Given the challenge of finding and killing as much as 300 pounds of prey every day, killer whales in the wild -- like any species -- conserve energy and move only as much as necessary. Killer whales living in our parks are given all the food they require. They also exercise, receive veterinary care, live in the company of other members of their species, and receive mental stimulation. They adapt very well to life in a zoological setting. I should also note that the overwhelming majority of killer whales in our parks were born in the care of man.

**CNN:** What specifically have we learned about captive orcas that has benefited marine biology and applies to orcas in the wild?

**SeaWorld:**Please see the attached bibliographies([Here](http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2013/images/10/11/killer.whale.bibliography.10.08.13.pdf) and [here](http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2013/images/10/11/killer.whale.sea..hubbs.collaboration.pdf)- PDFs). Much of what is known about the killer whale's anatomy, reproductive biology and capacity to learn was learned at SeaWorld and other accredited zoological institutions.

**CNN:**SeaWorld trainer and Vice President Michael Scarpuzzi notes the "millions of safe interactions we have had with killer whales" in the past 50 years. Does SeaWorld intend to put trainers back into the water with its killer whales?

**SeaWorld:**Trainers enter the water only as part of in-water safety desensitization training. You can learn more about that process [here](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2011-02-23/business/os-seaworld-trainers-water-20110223_1_dawn-brancheau-water-with-killer-whales-tilikum). Our trainers have not entered the water for performances since February 2010 and we have no plans for them to return to that kind of interaction with our whales.

**CNN:**How's Tilikum doing today? Is he participating in any of SeaWorld's shows?

**SeaWorld:**He is doing well for a killer whale that is more than 30 years old. He interacts with other whales and our zoological staff and he makes regular public appearances.

**CNN:**What are SeaWorld's thoughts on sea pens as an alternative solution where humans can not only study and research killer whales, but enjoy them as well?

**SeaWorld:**Sea pens can be effective for transitioning a rescued animal back to life in the open ocean, but they are not appropriate for long-term care. Our killer whale habitats are the largest and most sophisticated ever constructed for a marine mammal: 7 million gallons of continually filtered and chilled water. They provide an environment that allows us to properly care for, display and study the animals.

**CNN:**How is SeaWorld's current park attendance compared to last year? Whether you've seen an incline or a decline, what do you attribute that to?

**SeaWorld:**Our attendance is good. In fact, we are on pace for a record year in 2013.