

Luckiest kid in the world

Business



When I was nine years old, my one birthday wish was to go to Sea World, to get close to the majestic sea creatures and maybe even ride some roller coasters- every fourth grader's dream. When the trip was finalized, I felt like the luckiest kid in the world. Walking along the concrete pathways riddled with wrappers, booths selling key chains and slushy stations, I was unable to stop smiling. A flashing billboard caught my eye, featuring a sleek orca whale mid-jump, seeming to smile at the audience.

Just beneath her were her proud trainers and a bold font advertising "Shamu: The Dancing Orca Whale," and her performance schedule. The next one was in five minutes! I grabbed my dad's hand and practically dragged him into the stadium. It was filled with hundreds of parents and their screaming children. I scanned the packed bleachers for a spot for us to sit, and we settled for squeezing into a spot meant for one. Completely caught up in the excitement, I sat on the edge of my seat and stared intently at the clear, blue pool, impatiently awaiting the arrival of the dancing orca whale.

I later found out that Shamu was trapped in the back of her too-small tank, hidden from the audience to build suspense. She circled her tank non-stop, as always, to try to get the exercise necessary for a healthy lifestyle, equal to about 1, 400 circles in the confines of her tank a day. Soon enough, lights of every color circled the stage as the announcer's rumbling voice crackled over the loudspeakers, almost deafening the audience members seated too close to the water. "Who's ready to see Shamu?" We all screamed and cheered to demonstrate our excitement, and apparently failed to do so. "I SAID, WHO'S READY TO SEE SHAMU?" Everyone went ballistic, jumping out of their seats, waving their arms, and screaming as loud as humanly

possible. This seemed to appease him, and he turned around with flair and shouted, “ Then let the show begin!” A journey song blasted through the speakers, and I instinctively covered my throbbing ears with my hands, just as a dark shadow began to make its way through the show tank.

On a strong chord, Shamu leapt out into the air, showcasing her twenty one foot long body, flicking her tail at the end for pizzazz. Landing with an astronomical splash, she dove down into the depths of the tank, leaving a circular wave to ripple out to the end of the tank. Before we could close our gaping mouths, a second whale came out from the back of the tank. She splashed the audience with her tail, waved her huge fin, and jumped up vertically, landing merely feet from the surfacing Shamu in their cramped quarters. Shamu and her unnamed duet partner passed each other with rehearsed ease, touching flippers as if they were high-fiving childhood buddies. Unfortunately, this couldn't have been the case.

I didn't know at the time that Orca whales are very social creatures. They tend to bond for life, always wanting to be with their pod members. But they were ripped from their pod of family and friends and forced into tanks with unfamiliar whales from different pods who communicate through different languages, unable to connect. Orca whales are ranked second in social intelligence behind humans. They crave family connection as much as humans do, and experience emotional pain.

Moreover, any whale in captivity is likely to be moved across the country to another SeaWorld any day, so lifelong bonding was made impossible.

Nonetheless, they played the role of best friends with professionalism. Both

of the whales swam over to their dancing trainers to collect their treats for their performance so far. After dramatically being fed the unnatural, thawed, dead fish, they both dove off into the water, head first, showing off their sleek black and white skin, dorsal fin, long back, and tail. To the average viewer, the dorsal fin of a captive orca draws no attention.

At the age of nine I'm sure that I didn't give it a second thought as I impatiently awaited the next trick. When I look back on it though, I wish that I had taken note of the way that it flopped over on its side- a flimsy clue to Shamu's state of well-being. I did some research on the significance of whale's dorsal fins and how they portray their health. In the wild, dorsal fins on orca whales stand up completely straight, only bending on injured whales that are close to death. However, it's very common to see a flimsy, flopped over fin on captive whales.

This is due to a lack of exercise, poor health, warm temperatures, dehydration, or too much time spent at the surface. Luckily for the owners of SeaWorld and Shamu's trainers, this is a little known fact and doesn't affect the amount of viewers in the audience cheering on the dancing whales. As the grand finale took place, the lights became brighter, the music became louder, and the jumps became higher to appease the audience's thirst for excitement. Flip after flip took place, the couple got closer and closer to crashing into each other in all of the excitement, but never quite did. With a final bang of the drums, they jumped in synch; flipping their tails just as a confetti cannon went off, causing the audience to lose their heads. I grinned and clapped my hands in awe of the thrilling show.

However, there was a small ball in the pit of my stomach, and a slight tightness in my throat. My dad clapped me on the shoulder with a spark of enthusiasm in his eyes. “ Wasn’t that just the coolest thing you’ve ever seen?” I paused for a moment, unable to put my uneasiness into words. “ Yeah, it was really, um, different. But something feels... I don’t know... not right about it,” I trailed off and glanced at the tank of too-clear, too-blue water as Shamu was lured back into the holding tank for viewers to see in the “ Performer’s Exhibit, Only \$4.

99 To Touch The Famous, Dancing Shamu.” “ Are you saying that you aren’t grateful for this expensive birthday trip? You’re so lucky to be here!” Dad snapped at me, instantly making me feel guilty. He then firmly put his arm around my shoulders and whisked me off to the Shamu Express Rollercoaster. Unable to tear my eyes away, I locked my gaze on the tank for as long as possible, craning my neck over my shoulder long enough to see her shadow disappear behind the stage. I am lucky to be here, and see these breathtaking whales up close and personal, doing tricks just for my pleasure.

But Shamu are the most unlucky whales I’ve ever seen, I bet they miss their families, and the ocean. I surfaced from my nine-year-old naivety that I had been living in, and thought about how awful it would be to be stuck in a small tank, far away from home, and forced to perform three times a day. Shaking my head, I speed-walked to the ever-growing roller coaster line, pushing the discomfort out of my mind as the rest of the audience did. In doing so, I was allowing this mistreatment of Orca whales to be considered normal and acceptable in society.