

Blackfish

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The documentary *Blackfish* was created in 2013 and covers the story of Tilikum, the orca that surrounded many controversies within SeaWorld. The film follows a structure of moving back and forth between incidents with Tilikum and interviews with either workers or those associated with victims.

Throughout the film, we are given perspectives from employees and higher ups at SeaWorld regarding their methods and what they believe (at least, at the time of interview) the orcas they capture feel. Some employees speak as though they have little doubt in their own minds that there was nothing to indicate the violent nature of the animals they were interacting with, but the documentary shows us otherwise. There are many times intermittent through the film where we are shown the trainers, some of which are the victims of Tilikum's supposed ire. During these segments we see the trainers speak fondly of the orcas with nothing but reverence and gratefulness toward the creatures. Dawn Brancheau is especially eager about being able to work with Tilikum and perform shows with the orca.

It is only after these good intentions are displayed, that we see the realities of what occurs at SeaWorld. The documentary shows several clips of orcas in their natural habitat. Out in the ocean they are apex predators, hunting in packs as part of their average routines. This is where captivity begins for Tilikum. A team captures the orca and transports it far from home. Eventually, the orca would find itself in the care of the trainers of SeaWorld and this would serve as the start of the rest of Tilikum's life as a captive orca.

Some people lost their lives due to these shows and the possible effects they had on the whales, leading most to believe these are not isolated incidents. Keltie Byrne is the first victim of orca violence that lost her life working with Tilikum in Sealand of the Pacific on February 20,

1991 (Cowperthwaite, 2013). This incident led to the moving of Tilikum to SeaWorld in Orlando and the closure of Sealand soon after. After that, Tilikum would seemingly claim another life in Daniel P. Dukes who was found on the whale's back in his sleeping pool on July 6, 1999. Unlike the first incident, this was a death involving a park visitor who presumably snuck into the whale's tank. This incident, while less the fault of SeaWorld and more the fault of the individual, was still another sign that the orca's captivity was a problem that needed to be addressed. This, of course, then leads to the death of Dawn Brancheau who was pulled underwater and drowned by Tilikum after a show on February 24, 2010. Brancheau's death would be the catalyst for the creation of *Blackfish*, though Tilikum would still return to doing shows following her death.

While I certainly feel that the trainers, or at least the ones that were interviewed, had no mal intent when they made training the whales their career, it is clear to me that some decision for safety needed to be made as far back as 1991. A few clips in the film show that there were a number of incidents where an orca's behavior led to an accident or injured the trainers. With this in mind, higher-ups had the responsibility to do something to minimize casualties, but instead in most cases, they opted to insist everything was fine and continued operation as if nothing was amiss.

The ignorance on display in the film no doubt comes from miscommunication among employers and employees. In a few of the interview excerpts, the person being interviewed says that they are either unaware that anything is amiss, or they stretch the truth, as is the case regarding a statement about how Tilikum pulled Dawn Brancheau into the water. Former SeaWorld executive, Thad Lacinak is first cited saying that "Dawn, if she was standing here with me right now, would tell you that... It was her mistake in allowing that to happen." (Cowperthwaite, 2013). Of course, no sensible person would accept such an answer from the

person who should be held accountable for Ms. Brancheau's death. This statement is later corrected, but the damage that statement did to Brancheau's friends and family was irreparable. Had Lacinak shown some accountability, perhaps SeaWorld would not have been under so much scrutiny, but his poor choice of leadership led to a decline in SeaWorld's favorability and more importantly, the deaths of innocent people. Amy Newman's *Building Leadership Character: Lessons from Communication Failures* lists accountability as one of several important traits for a leader to exhibit (Newman, 2019). This very idea could have likely saved lives and seen Tilikum released to the oceans he was meant to be in.

There are multiple people involved in these cases and each person has some responsibility to do what is right. Whether it be the trainers for the orcas, the executives giving orders, or even the people coming to watch the shows, everyone who knew about Tilikum and his history had some level of shared responsibility for the events that took place. The events that occurred over Tilikum's life in captivity were nothing short of neglect and poor leadership. We unfortunately cannot undo what is already done, but as people who have the power to make decisions for the future, we can take these events as a lesson to prevent another *Blackfish* from ever having to be made.

References

Cowperthwaite, G. (Director). (2013). *Blackfish* [Film]. CNN.

Newman, A. (2019). *Building Leadership Character*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.