SeaWorld tanks or sea pens?  
Dispute over which is best for orcas continues 

For the killer whales at SeaWorld San Diego in California, there won't be a "Free Willy" happy ending.

A documentary released in 2013 accuses the company of neglecting and abusing its killer whales, or orcas. The movie “Blackfish” angered animal welfare activists. They are demanding that the San Diego theme park free its 11 orcas.

But marine biologists — including SeaWorld critics — agree that the orcas probably will never be released to the open seas.

Even if the killer whales don’t spend the rest of their lives in the theme park, the closest they would get to freedom would be retirement in ocean coves. The coves would be separated from open water by netting. There, they would be fed and cared for by humans for the rest of their lives.

Never Completely Freed

“They are not good candidates for release to the wild,” said Naomi Rose. She is a marine mammal scientist for the Animal Welfare Institute.

No enclosed sea pens exist to hold all 11 killer whales. The cost of building such pens could reach $5 million each, Rose said. The cost of paying workers to care for the orcas could cost up to $500,000 a year for each pen.

Although animal welfare groups have pushed the idea of moving SeaWorld’s orcas to sea pens, it may never happen. SeaWorld Entertainment Inc., which owns several SeaWorld parks in the U.S., has rejected the idea of giving up its killer whales. It says they are safer living in the parks’ concrete and glass cells.

“They would not be better off in sea pens than where they are now,” said Chris Dold, the head veterinarian for SeaWorld Entertainment. “We would not ever feel comfortable putting our whales into that setting.”

Sea Pens Hold Dangers

Dold and other SeaWorld supporters say sea pens could expose killer whales to ocean toxins, viruses and harsh weather. They say that long-captive orcas can’t withstand these conditions.

“There are so many reasons why sea pens are not a ... (cure-all),” said Kathleen Dezio. She is head of the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums. It is an international group that represents marine mammal parks and aquariums. The call to release the killer whales has grown louder since the release of “Blackfish.”

Facing customer anger from the documentary, SeaWorld San Diego proposed a $100 million plan last year to double the size of its killer whale exhibit. The project was called Blue World. It won the approval from the state of California in October. However, California officials added the condition that SeaWorld end its captive breeding program and halt the transfer of its orcas in and out of the park.

Park Challenges Breeding Ban

SeaWorld has put Blue World on hold and has filed a lawsuit. The lawsuit challenges the state’s authority to impose the no-breeding conditions.

During the court hearing, SeaWorld critics waved banners calling for the release of the orcas. Animal welfare activists said the captive orcas are tortured and driven insane by their concrete homes. They insist that the killer whales would be happier in sea pens.

A petition on change.org has collected more than 220,000 signatures. It calls for SeaWorld Orlando in Florida to release an orca featured in “Blackfish,” Tilikum, to a sea pen. One famous example of a captive orca released to a sea pen is Keiko. He was the orca whose story was featured in the 1993 movie “Free Willy.”

Unhappy Ending For 1 Freed Orca

Keiko was captured off Iceland in 1979 and trained to perform at theme parks. After several years at a theme park in Mexico City, Mexico, the killer whale was transported to a sea pen in Iceland in 1998. Experts disagree on whether the move was a success.

Caretakers say they spent up to $300,000 a month to care for and attempt to train the orca to feed itself in the wild. During a short swim outside of the pen, accompanied by caretakers on a ship, Keiko swam away and turned up in a deep inlet in Norway. There, he was found playing with children and fishermen along the shore. The orca died a few months later of acute pneumonia, a lung disease.

And Debate About What’s Best Continues

Mark Simmons is a former SeaWorld trainer who was hired to assist with Keiko in Iceland. He said the Keiko experience showed that sea pens are not a safe environment for orcas.

Simmons said storms and strong currents in Iceland damaged Keiko’s sea pen. They created so much noise and vibration that it likely unsettled the killer whale.

Dold, SeaWorld’s chief veterinarian, said sea pens can also expose whales to viruses from fish in the pens. Toxins and oil spills that wash in with the tide are also a problem.

Animal welfare activists say critics dismiss the pens because they don’t want to consider an alternative to keeping the orca captive.

“They are blindsiding it because they don’t want a solution,” said Ingrid Visser, founder of the Orca Research Trust. It is a nonprofit group dedicated to education and the research of orcas. “We can put a man on the moon, surely we can move an animal out of a concrete life.”
In Apple’s backyard, iPads ignite furor in schools


CUPERTINO, CA – Not too far away from Apple’s headquarters in California, public middle schools in the city of Cupertino want to require students to use iPads in class and at home.

School district officials and many teachers say the iPads are great learning tools. Students seem thrilled to have them. But many parents in the district question the benefit of the devices and hundreds have signed a request to limit the use of iPads.

Some parents say the iPads have introduced new problems, like protecting private personal information and distracting kids with games. And they do not want to pay hundreds of dollars for school equipment that state law says is the district’s responsibility.

IPads Are For Entertainment, Not Education

"iPads are entertainment devices," said Noemi Berry, a network engineer and mother of a seventh-grader and two other children. "They're not designed for education, and they're very hard to restrict. I have a 12-year-old boy who has a horrible screen-addiction problem."

So far, the iPad proponents are winning. This means hundreds more middle-schoolers in Cupertino will be expected to use iPads for schoolwork.

Cupertino Union School District spokesman Jeff Bowman said putting iPads in every middle-schooler’s hands has improved the quality of their work. Language ability, behavior and organizational skills are better, although the district doesn’t have numbers to measure how much better. Also, principals talk to parents about how to rein in excessive video-gaming.

Apple had no comment on Cupertino’s program, and Bowman said the company didn’t influence the district’s decision to use its product.

Some Students Use Devices For Homework Too

It's common for school districts to provide students computers or tablets for class use. A small but growing number now require students to use those devices, or their own, for homework, too.

Few districts, however, decide which manufacturer they use. Manufacturers are the businesses making the technology, such as Apple, whose products tend to cost more than devices like Chromebooks, which are made by Google. Bowman said they chose iPads because they considered them more durable and to offer instructional advantages.

"Cupertino has a one-device-per-student program that has cost the district at least $363,000 this school year for hardware, software, management, security and teacher training. The program is in three middle schools and expanding to two others. If parents do not provide students with an iPad, they use a loaner one."

But school officials implied that it was families responsibility to provide the devices, which cost $563.

It's Against The Law To Require Parents To Buy IPads

It is against the state law that parents pay for required supplies at public schools. So, the district hasn’t required parents to buy them. But parents say they feel pressure to go along with the iPad program.

Parents like Vaishnavi Sridhar, mother of a sixth-grader, said Kit Bragg, the principal at Lawson Middle School, indicated at a meeting that district-owned devices were reserved for needy students.

"A lot of families that day went back home thinking they had to buy an iPad," Sridhar said.

Victor Leung of the American Civil Liberties Union’s Southern California branch said that, technically, Cupertino complies with the law by offering to provide devices. But he added that, legally, districts cannot pressure students to buy equipment and supplies.

Some Parents Struggle To Control Their Kids' Usage

The cost is only a small part of some parents’ objections to the iPad program. "A lot of families that day went back home thinking they had to buy an iPad," Sridhar said.

For some instructors, however, the devices have transformed teaching. Andi Jackson, who teaches eighth-graders English and social studies, said iPads offer students many ways to show what they've learned. "Before the iPad," Jackson said, "there was basically one way: Write an essay and turn it in."

"We cannot control his usage at all," Wang said.

Of about 180 parents who responded to a district survey last year, just under half said they valued their children's iPad work. A third said it had improved their kids' attitude toward school. The district plans to form a task force to review its educational technology use; meanwhile, it's expanding its iPads-for-all program to two other middle schools.

School iPads Have Received Positive Feedback As Well

Some parents have arranged for their children to use a district-owned iPad while at school. Those devices don't come home. An online request is asking the Cupertino district to standardize that practice of providing iPads for students and keeping them in the classroom. It has more than 650 signatures.

"Making a story about an event lets me better understand the big picture," Peter Chu, a software executive whose daughter Ashley is a ninth-grader at Cupertino High School, sees the iPad as a wonderful education tool that's "creative, engaging and appropriate for this day and age."

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