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## Are sanctuaries and cetacean releases viable alternatives?

As we move ahead through the 21st century and the disconnection between humans and nature increases, the already important educational animal presentations in modern zoological facilities become more and more necessary. Every animal species housed in a zoo becomes an ambassador not only for its wild counterparts, but also for many others that live in endangered habitats and ecosystems.

From more than 46 years ago Loro Parque has become a home for numerous animals in need: chimpanzees, penguins, gorillas, tigers, even orcas. More than a decade ago, SeaWorld needed space to house its growing group of killer whales and Loro Parque agreed to build the world's most modern facility to provide new space for four of them. In 2006 Skyla, Kohana, Tekoa and Keto (second and third generation orcas bred under human care) arrived to the brand new facilities built at Loro Parque. The group welcomed a new member in 2010, when Adan was born. And in 2011 the Dutch Government requested Loro Parque to house Morgan, an orca found emaciated in the Wadden Sea the previous year, and which was declared non-releasable by the Dutch authorities. At that point the only alternative for Morgan was euthanasia, as the experts and the Supreme Court, after eight previous similar resolutions, agreed that her release would mean a slow but sure death.

Nowadays the six orcas housed at Loro Parque are in perfect shape; their health is closely monitored by a team of veterinarians and their daily needs attended to by a group of zoo keepers with extensive experience in taking care of this species. The social structure of the group is stable and the veterinary records prove that in the last three years they have not presented any significant pathology. Their welfare is continuously monitored by unaffiliated experts from different universities and independent international consultants visit the premises regularly to give advice on various husbandry aspects.

Although there are no concerns about the health and welfare of this group of orcas, some groups of activists like PETA (People for the Ethic Treatment of Animals), Born Free Foundation or Free Morgan Foundation, actively lobby different administrations to release these animals to the sea, or to relocate them to a marine sanctuary. As we will explain further on, the liberation of these animals to the sea is completely impossible and their transfer to a sanctuary will not improve their welfare but rather the contrary. But lately the blackmailing and the pressure from the activists is not limited anymore to the administrations or zoological institutions, they are also threatening tour operators and other companies that work in the touristic sector.

### It suits to ask two questions:

**Who is saying that the orcas in zoological institutions are not happy?** The answer is only given by anti-zoo organizations. Not any researcher from an independent institution (university) with academic knowledge and accredited experience about animal welfare corroborates these affirmations. Some scientists that have supported the anti-zoo organizations are not experts in animal welfare but their experience is based only on general biology or neuroanatomy.



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**On what are their affirmations, that the orcas are suffering, based?** Their affirmations are not based on measurements of hormones, rigorous investigations about behaviour or careful scientific studies that evaluate the personality or the activity of the animals. The affirmations of the anti-zoo organizations are based on prejudices and speculations never proven.

In contrast, Loro Parque has independent studies from experts in animal welfare of the Autonomous University of Barcelona and the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria which, by analyzing all hormonal parameters, their activity and behaviour, conclude that the welfare of the animals is very high.

This leaves very clear that the self-proclaimed organizations for animal rights claim that they are motivated by the lack of welfare of the zoo-housed orcas, despite the fact that none of them has the academic background in animal welfare. Actually, the vast majority of their personnel don't even have the minimum formation in biology or zoology. The truth is that the so called "animal rights" organizations have turned into big multinational businesses that receive million of dollars in donations from good-hearted people who are truly concerned about animals. Due to this lack of knowledge and experience the effects of these campaigns against zoos that have cetaceans in their care have a disastrous outcome for the orcas. SeaWorld's decision to stop the breeding program of their orcas in 2016 has resulted in reactivating the hunt of orcas in Russia in order to fulfill the demand of Chinese parks.

At this point it is very important to analyze the demands that the anti-zoo groups make to the administrations and the tour operators: to liberate the orcas to the sea or to transfer them to marine sanctuaries.

### 1.- Can the orcas be returned to the sea?

The answer is very clear: No. And they know it because we're talking about a group of hybrid animals (a mixture between orcas from the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans) and no administration from any country will allow that they are liberated into the sea since the risk of genetic contamination of the wild orca populations will be far too high.

And if that was not enough, these animals, born in second, third and fourth generation under human care, have never learned to hunt their prey. The only known experience of liberating an orca that was born wild and kept 20 years under human care (Keiko) demonstrated that it is not possible for them to recuperate the ability to hunt for their own food; and this, even though Keiko had not been born under human care. The adaptation of animals that have lived several generations under human care would be even more difficult.

Also the health authorities would not allow a reintroduction into the sea because of the possibility to liberate at the same time bacteria, fungi, and parasites which have been treated with medicines and could cause severe epidemics in wild populations of dolphins and whales.



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The best evidence of the impossibility to re-adapt zoo-housed killer whales to the sea is the reintroduction of Keiko (the protagonist of the film “Free Willy”). After more than three years of preparation and 20 million dollars spent, the only result was the sacrifice of a beautiful animal that was incapable of hunting for itself. But it seems that neither PETA nor Born Free Foundation or Free Morgan Foundation have learned anything from the death of Keiko and keep on presenting the liberation as an ideal solution.

## 2.- Would the orcas welfare status improve if they are transferred to a sanctuary?

In this case the answer also is no. It is very naive to think that orcas, that have lived various generations in zoological facilities, will automatically swim longer distances for the mere fact of having more space. The reality is that the orcas would have to be kept exactly the same way as in zoological institutions, with trainers that motivate them to swim and jump in order to release their energy, a team of veterinarians that can obtain blood, urine, stool and blowhole samples (which can only be achieved with training) to guarantee their health.

For the same reasons of genetic contamination and the possible epidemic infections earlier mentioned, no government will allow the construction of a sanctuary in its waters since this would put the wild populations of dolphins and whales in high danger. The possibility of an accidental or deliberate escape of the animals from a sanctuary is very high, the same as the transmission of illness and infections through the water that will be exchanged with seawater without purification. There is a famous precedent of an intentional liberation of two dolphins from a sanctuary, of which one died and the other one ended up with severe damage since neither of them was able to hunt fish to feed themselves. The author of this liberation, Rick O’Barry, was sentenced for animal abuse breaking the Marine Mammal Protection Act of the USA.

In case of oil spills or other naval accidents or simply by the general plastic pollution, the animals would be in great risk of contamination.

In case of storms the animals would be at risk of drowning if the nets of the enclosure broke or simply that big waves in the bay would push them to land. Therefore, the sanctuary will need to have an emergency system which in practice means to build a pool with its filtration system, water control, etc.

The dietary necessities of the orcas would be the same as in the zoological facility. That means that they have to be offered 8 to 9 feedings which represent more than 300kg of highest quality fish daily. It is not possible to find this amount of live fish in a small bay and if live fish gets thrown in, it would escape through the holes of the nets. Therefore, the feeding in a sanctuary would also have to be based on frozen fish.

A group of 6 of these big animals produces approximately 54,000kg of excrement a year; this means that very strong tidal current would be needed to keep the bay clean. But the tides could have a negative impact on the animals as well as the nets and moorings used to close the bay.

To keep an orca costs approximately 600,000 US\$ a year which means that a sanctuary needs to generate a minimum of 3.6 million dollars yearly for at least 40 to 50 years to come. Taking into consideration the difficulties that dog and cat shelters have nowadays to maintain their very inferior costs, it might very well be possible that these costs, in a few years, will have to be paid by the taxes of all citizens.





All these arguments leave it very clear that neither the reintroduction into the sea nor the transfer into a sanctuary are viable options for orcas born under human care like the ones at Loro Parque. But what about Morgan? She has not been born under human care. This is true and, as has been explained, Morgan arrived to Loro Parque because she was rescued, which saved her life, and because of a petition from the Dutch Authorities so that they didn't have to euthanize her. This means that thanks to Loro Parque her life was saved twice.

With the arrival of Morgan to our installations, we were very aware of three things:

Our interference was necessary in order to save the life of an animal.

Our maintenance cost would increase by US\$ 600,000 per year.

Morgan would not bring one customer more to Loro Parque.

But as on many previous occasions, Loro Parque has highlighted the fact that there was an animal in need. This is why we have received Morgan and welcomed her not only with professionalism but most of all with tremendous love and respect towards an animal with a big history of suffering.

However, and unexpected by us, the arrival of Morgan also unchained the criticisms of the activists and their false arguments, as for example, that her family awaits her in the sea (although her pod had never been located) when the most likely was that her family had left her behind because of a sensory deficiency. This hearing deficit, which was not diagnosed until several months after of her arrival to our facilities, might have been the reason why, applying the maxim of "only the strong survive", her family separated from her, an animal that cannot help in the survival of the group.

When Morgan's trainers started to suspect that she was deaf, Loro Parque contacted the highest experts in cetacean acoustics, Dr. Houser, Dr. Luke and Dr. Finneran of the National Marine Mammal Foundation, IMARES and the US Navy respectively. They demonstrated the complete lack of hearing of Morgan and published their results in a scientific journal.

Therefore, the liberation of Morgan into the sea would be her death penalty because, besides that she has never learned how to hunt (like the other orcas in the group), her hearing deficit would not allow her to find prey since it implies that her sonar does not function. Also her communication problems would not allow her to coordinate herself with other orcas in order to hunt and orcas like Morgan are not able to feed themselves.

In conclusion, if PETA or Born Free Foundation would achieve their objective, to take the orcas from Loro Parque to a sanctuary or to liberate, they would only provoke their sure death.



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This leaves very clear that the reclamations of PETA, Born Free or Free Morgan Foundation don't have any ground, nor are they justified from the point of view of animal welfare. But these organizations that should be working for animal welfare are not doing it. Unfortunately they are not using their funds to increase animal welfare but rather use them to organize campaigns based on lies to discredit zoos and so gain even more funds. For example, PETA obtains only in the USA donations for over 60 million dollars yearly, they do not run one single animal shelter but their Directors earn five digit salaries, their staff travels in Business class and stay at luxury hotels. Not one single dollar of the multinational PETA goes into the conservation of threatened species, quite the contrary; it is well known that they kill thousands of animals like the book enclosed (Why PETA Kills) demonstrates.

Who takes care of the 300.000 dolphins that get killed each year, victims of the incidental fishing, the ghost nets, the contamination or boat crashes?

Who takes care of 100 million of sharks that are caught each year in our Oceans?

For sure not PETA, nor Born Free nor Free Morgan Foundation and not any other anti-zoo organization care the least about these animals.

The budget of PETA, only in the USA, is approximately the total business volume of the Loro Parque Group which gives work to 1000 people and acts in good faith taking care of over 40.000 animals under its responsibility. In spite of the fact that Loro Parque does not reach the enormous business volume of PETA, 10% of each entrance fee to Loro Parque is given to Loro Parque Foundation which invests each year 1.000.000 US\$ in conservation projects around the world. In 24 years of history Loro Parque Foundation has participated in 150 conservation projects and has invested 19 million US\$. Loro Parque Foundation has saved 9 parrot species from its extinction; some of them independently and others in cooperation with other zoological and conservation institutions. It is important to reflect at this point that neither PETA nor Born Free Foundation carry out any projects to save wildlife. In the case of PETA it is clear that they live on blackmailing, by proclaiming lies in order to destroy big companies.

In the case of Born Free Foundation, you can see the video document in which the responsible of a Born Free Foundation sanctuary in Ethiopia declares publicly the different reasons why the animals are better housed in an enclosure than in the wild.

It is incomprehensible that Thomas Cook, after 45 years of a honest and satisfactory collaboration with Loro Parque, lets itself intimidate by PETA, Born Free and other anti-zoo organizations and deprives its customers in Tenerife from a visit to an ecological institution, an Embassy of exotic animals and plants which finds itself threatened by the Sixth Extinction. It is scientifically proven that this sixth extinction has been unchained by the unstoppable population growth and the destruction of the habitats which has multiplied by 1,000 the natural extinction rate of the species.





In a world which starts to experience the first effects of the climate change, with big areas in Northern Europe suffering temperatures of more than 40°C, in a world where the oceans suffer from overfishing and pollution, in a world where a group of orcas attacks and devours pilot whales near the coasts of Tenerife, or the image of one of the last orcas of the southern population of killer whales in Vancouver carrying her dead calf for over ten days on her forehead; these are facts that should make us reflect.

This of course is not the best moment for Thomas Cook to decide that the animals which Loro Parque takes care of with the outmost love and respect should be eliminated from its touristic offer.

And although it might sound like a contradiction, nowadays are more cetaceans in the oceans of our planet than 60 years ago. This was achieved thanks to the TV series “Flipper” and to the many dolphinariums which created a link with millions of visitors from all around the world and prepared a social sensibility towards the whale hunt at an international level.

Therefore, the attacks of zoological institutions that house cetaceans and in advance to the zoological community in general, puts at risk one of the few tools that has been demonstrated useful in the conservation work of threatened species.

In this situation, while the media makes echo that the Finnish tour operators think about following the example of Thomas Cook, Loro Parque continues to grow. This clearly demonstrates that, in spite of the political decisions of the tour operators, the customers continue to trust Loro Parque and understand the important role that we disembark in the conservation of our planet. The support of our visitors shows very clear that Loro Parque is a necessary institution for Nature and the exotic animals and if Loro Parque wouldn't exist, it would have to be invented for the sake of our planet.



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