



## Blackfish Discussion Guide

Director: Gabriela Cowperthwaite

Year: 2013

Time: 83 min

**You might know this director from:**

City Lax: An Urban Lacrosse Story (2010)

### FILM SUMMARY

Harrowing and illuminating, **BLACKFISH** tells the story of SeaWorld's Tilikum, a 12,000-pound bull orca, who caused the death of three humans, including his trainer, Dawn Brancheau, in 2010.

Old clips of SeaWorld's commercials show the public image of playful dolphins and orcas, celebrating man's harmonious relationship with nature and inviting children to play with mighty sea creatures. Those who were involved in selling this fantasy, however, reveal the behind-the-scenes truth of tragedy and violence. Through candid testimonies, former SeaWorld trainers reflect with guilt, regret, and sorrow as they talk about their roles in selling a performance to an audience. Whale experts speak about the orca's incredible intelligence and sentience, and a whale hunter mournfully reflects how he hunted Tilikum, separating him from his family. The film also claims that SeaWorld neglected to reveal the full truth to their trainers regarding the dangers of working with orcas. But for many, what is most horrific and persuasive of the film's anti-captivity stance are the images of magnificent creatures confined in small pools and the archival footage of trainers being attacked, jerked into the water, and dragged to the bottom of the pool.

**BLACKFISH** delves into the tragedy, folly, and cruelty of hunting wild orcas and keeping them captive in an unnatural manner. It also seeks to uncover the truth of the danger and death behind shows in which killer whales frolic, leap, and splash the audience on cue. Ultimately, the film is an impassioned plea that is difficult to ignore and impossible to forget.

## FILM THEMES

BLACKFISH argues against orca captivity, challenges the entire marine park industry, and asks the public to consider their complicity as well.

### MARINE PARK INDUSTRY

The marine park industry is a multi-billion dollar industry that is popular worldwide. BLACKFISH focuses on SeaWorld and its captivity of orcas. In the film, the wondrous promotional videos and celebrity endorsements provide a glossy cover for the more disturbing brutality, which was not released to the public. The film suggests that SeaWorld's relationship to the public is more important than its relationship to former trainers and animals because the public provides the income and incentive to keep the show going. Ultimately, the marine park industry cannot thrive without public support.

### PERFORMANCE

In the film, former SeaWorld trainers reflect on how they were told what to say, including "scientific facts" that were not true. For example, orcas live longer in the wild, almost as long as humans, but former trainers were told to say that wild orcas only lived 25-30 years, and even longer in captivity. Another lie involves the collapsed dorsal of Tilimuk and other orcas. It is, in fact, not common, and indicative of living in captivity. SeaWorld itself is performing, in a sense, when it does not fully disclose the details of attacks to the public or when it tries to spin human injury and death another way.

### ANIMAL CRUELTY AS ENTERTAINMENT

Critics of orca captivity argue that SeaWorld does not educate, it entertains. Orcas perform unnatural tricks, and the public does not see how they behave in the wild. The most vociferous critics may compare marine parks to other forms of animal entertainment such as cock-fighting and dog-fighting. These were once popular and legal, but are now illegal in the U.S. Whales are not pitted against each other explicitly, but the film shows that they can exhibit aggressive violent behavior towards each other through punishment-led training or because they are confined in small spaces while grouped together in unnaturally mixed pods. One speaker in the film predicts that marine parks will one day in the future be regarded as barbaric.

### NATURAL BEHAVIOR VS. LEARNED BEHAVIOR

Orcas are intelligent animals that can learn behaviors and perform on cue. But they are creatures with their own innate behaviors, their own communication and relationship styles. Living in an unnatural environment, they are forced to perform unnatural acts in order to be fed. This artificial environment conflicts with their natural instincts, especially when it comes to group dynamics. Killer whales have their own families and pods with distinct cultures, but they are grouped in mixed pods that may have social friction within. This is especially dangerous considering that orcas can display dominance and attack each other, becoming more aggressive to humans as well.

**“[SeaWorld has] tremendous financial resources and could play a key role in creating sea sanctuaries which could be a profit-making endeavor. I believe people would flock to a site where a killer whale is being a killer whale for the first time—something infinitely more satisfying than seeing a killer whale dance the Macarena.”**

-Gabriela Cowperthwaite, Filmmaker



## FILM FACTS:

- The killer whale (*Orcinus orca*), also known as the orca or blackfish, is a toothed whale belonging to the dolphin family.
- In their natural habitat, most orcas travel up to 100 miles a day and stay near, or with, their families.
- Orcas are powerful predators with teeth that can be four inches long. They eat seals, sea lions, and other whales, and they can grab seals off the ice.
- The orca pods use co-operative hunting techniques to catch their prey. Some family hunting groups can be made up of up to 40 individuals.
- Orcas make a wide range of sounds for communication. They also use echolocation to communicate and hunt.
- Killer whales can be found in all oceans on Earth, including the frigid Antarctic and Arctic and tropical seas.
- SeaWorld's corporate incident log lists more than 100 incidents of orca aggression, many causing injuries to humans.
- 53 orcas are currently in captivity at 12 marine parks around the world. SeaWorld has 23 orcas living in its 3 U.S. marine parks. Shamu was first brought to live at SeaWorld in the late 60s.
- 37 orcas have died in captivity in SeaWorld's three parks. There have been 30 live births at the parks, 10 of which died, along with 10 of their mothers.
- In March 2013, following an incident in which a child was bitten by a dolphin at SeaWorld, the USDA conducted an investigation and cited SeaWorld for several violations of the Animal Welfare Act.
- In the "Journal of Marine Animals and Their Ecology," John Jett and Jeffrey Ventre put forth that captive orcas are more vulnerable to mosquito-transmitted diseases. At least two have died in marine parks.
- In a CNN interview, filmmaker Cowperthwaite said that many people ask if she wants SeaWorld to be shut down. She explains that she doesn't want that because SeaWorld has great resources to build sea sanctuaries for the orcas.
- Keiko, the killer whale, was in captivity for 22 years. After 4 years of effort, much private funding, and Jean-Michel Cousteau's help, Keiko was returned to the wild. However, Keiko was never totally free, always dependent on human support. On his blog, Cousteau writes, "After years of training, at great expense, Keiko was finally able to catch and eat live fish and was returned to the waters in Iceland near where he was captured. He never integrated with the wild whales he encountered."

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others a chance to experience this powerful documentary.
2. Support the Dawn Brancheau Foundation, created "in her honor to continue the legacy of the work important to Dawn during her life."
3. Sign the petition to "End Captive Orca Breeding Program" at SeaWorld on [change.org](https://change.org).
4. Become a member of Save the Whales and learn about how you can help.
5. Support the The Born Free Foundation. Educate yourself and enlighten others about animal captivity.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**