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China Embraces Killer Whale Shows, Even As SeaWorld Ends Them

By Violet Law

Special for USA TODAY

ZHUHAI, China--Forget the oohs and aahs. The recent debut of killer whales at China's largest aquarium here has sparked concerns worldwide that the country is repeating similar mistakes that plagued some U.S. marine parks.

China is experiencing a boom in marine parks as an increasing number of Chinese flock to watch the sea creatures perform. That also has resulted in overcrowded tanks, poor water quality and ignorance about marine mammal illnesses at the attractions.

Park operators are ignoring animal welfare and worker safety, according to animal rights activists.

"They are going through a learning curve that is not necessary and completely outdated--and they're taking an enormous risk," said Naomi Rose, marine mammal scientist with the Animal Welfare Institute in Washington, D. C., who recently visited some of China's largest marine parks. "A trainer will be injured or killed sooner or later. It'd be sad because it's totally avoidable."

China currently has 44 ocean theme parks operating in 24 provinces, and 18 more slated to open, marking a 20% increase in just two years. The country still lacks a breeding program for the mammals, which makes it the world's most active customer for marine animals caught in the wild.

Rose and other animal rights advocates said China hasn't heeded the lessons learned by U.S. parks that kept killer whales in captivity. After an orca was implicated in three human deaths over the past three decades, SeaWorld San Diego stopped its orca theatrical shows this year. SeaWorld's parks in Florida and Texas are slated to end the performances in 2019.

"As society's understanding of orcas continues to change, SeaWorld is changing with it," SeaWorld CEO Joel Manby said in a statement earlier this year.

Located in this southern city abutting Macau and billed as China's Orlando, Chimelong Ocean Kingdom has its trainers nuzzle up to orcas--which the Chinese call "tiger whales"--as though they were house cats. Some of the orcas sport yellow blotches, likely signs of a skin infection on their chins, said Rose. Even though the orcas are too young to mate, six were packed into one breeding tank.

Chimelong's management didn't address specific questions about safety concerns in handling the orcas but said in a statement: "All along we're very much concerned about the conservation and propagation of these wildlife mammals."

"The Chinese treat the mammals like commodities that they can throw away," said Mitchel Kalmanson, whose consulting firm in Florida has overseen deliveries of marine mammals to parks in China. "They figure they can buy more if they can't keep them alive."

Chimelong's orcas were caught in Russian waters and are not yet performing in shows. But beluga whales at Chimelong wow audiences and earn treats by dashing across a pool at jet-ski speed, acting as surfboards for their trainers. Visitors can pay to pat the bottlenose dolphins without first being disinfected.

"That's how dolphins come down with human disease," said Yuki Lui of the Hong Kong Dolphin Conservation Society, as she focused her camera on rake marks that she believed were signs of infighting between dolphins confined to a tight space.

Both Lui and Rose's organizations are part of the China Cetacean Alliance, formed in 2014 by animal rights groups across East Asia and Britain to galvanize support for animal rights in China. Cetacean, derived from Greek for "huge fish," is the scientific name for finned aquatic mammals such as dolphins and whales.

Between 2010 and 2015, China has seen the number of marine mammals held in captivity doubled to nearly 500, according to the alliance.

"In China, it isn't that people don't care but that they aren't aware of the real situation," said Keiko Chen, the alliance's China-based outreach coordinator. "Once people are aware of the real situation behind the scene, they'd feel disgusted and walk away from this form of entertainment."

China's Ministry of Agriculture in 2013 established clear guidelines for marine parks, including requirements on water quality, pool size, record-keeping on animals and their care. But it's unclear how officials ensure compliance, especially with rapid expansion.

A pod of five Chinese white dolphins, which arrived in Chimelong last fall from a shuttered park in Singapore, were living in a turbid tank carpeted with lime-green algae. The population of the dolphins, dubbed "pandas of the ocean," has dwindled to less than 2,000 in recent years.

At feeding time, staff docent Candy Tang ended her talk to visitors on a hopeful note: "The more we know about these dolphins, the more we'll cherish them."

Her message, however, may not have reached all the tourists. After gazing at a tank of whale sharks, one man murmured about getting some shark fin soup.

Summary

"China is experiencing a boom in marine parks as an increasing number of Chinese flock to watch the sea creatures perform. That also has resulted in overcrowded tanks, poor water quality and ignorance about marine mammal illnesses at the attractions. Park operators are ignoring animal welfare and worker safety, according to animal rights activists." **(USA Today (Online))** This article addresses concerns sparked by the "recent debut of killer whales at China's largest aquarium...that the country is repeating similar mistakes that plagued some U.S. marine parks."

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