


# Sea World Is Not Ending Orca Exploitation

 *Opposing Viewpoints Online Collection, 2017*  
From *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*

“SeaWorld is not phasing out orca shows; it is simply calling these shows by a different name, a semantic difference that makes no difference to the orcas still living in captivity.”

Laura Bridgeman is the Campaign and Communications Specialist at the International Marine Mammal Project of the Earth Island Institute and the director of Sonar, a think tank that advocates for the understanding and preservation of marine life. In the following viewpoint, Bridgeman contends that SeaWorld’s announcement that it is ending its orca shows does not mean that the marine park is ending the alleged mistreatment of its captive killer [whales](#). According to Bridgeman, SeaWorld’s announcement is only a public relations response to the negative publicity generated by critics such as the makers of the controversial 2013 documentary *Blackfish*, which highlighted problems with keeping orcas in captivity . She argues that SeaWorld is changing the name and description of its orca shows but is not adjusting their usual operations, which include the forced [captive breeding](#) of orca whales and their export and import in various captive facilities.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Bridgeman, in what ways did the media aid in misinforming the public about SeaWorld’s announcement?
2. What specific evidence does Bridgeman present to show that there has been no meaningful change despite years of public protest and government pressure to end SeaWorld’s alleged exploitation of [marine mammals](#)?
3. In your opinion, how can ordinary citizens work together to enact changes that would protect the earth’s [biodiversity](#) and natural resources? Explain your reasoning.

Yesterday’s headlines proclaiming that SeaWorld will be ending orca whale shows were almost as misleading as the alleged “educational value” of the shows themselves.

On Monday [November 2015], SeaWorld announced that it will “phase out” the San Diego park’s theatrical killer whale show in 2016, and unveil a “new orca experience” in 2017. According to the announcement, which was made in a presentation to investors, the new experience will be “informative.” SeaWorld also says the new shows will take place in a “more natural setting” and that they will carry a “conservation message inspiring people to act.”

This announcement was quickly picked up by media outlets around the country, generating headlines that SeaWorld was “ending,” “getting rid of,” and “drawing the curtain on” its killer whale show.

## No, It’s Not Over

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Unfortunately, many of Monday’s headlines exaggerated the announcement. SeaWorld’s infamous orca shows are being reworked, rather than eliminated, at the San Diego, California park. (The announcement does not pertain to SeaWorld’s other parks.) The announcement does not mean that SeaWorld will end orca

exploitation, or that it will release orcas to marine sanctuaries, the preferred course of action among many advocates.

The lack of meaningful change left many advocates frustrated. “SeaWorld fully intends to continue forced breeding of orcas in captivity,” says David Phillips, director of the International Marine Mammal Project (IMMP), an Earth Island Institute project that works to protect [dolphins](#) and whales. “They will continue to keep orcas in concrete tanks with no intention of retirement or release. They intend to continue to import and export orcas to other captive facilities as they see fit.”

Responding to the announcement in a press release, [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals](#) said: “This move is like no longer whipping lions in a circus act but keeping them locked inside cages for life.”

## Public and Political Pressure

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SeaWorld has faced mounting public pressure in recent years. The 2013 release of *Blackfish*, a popular documentary criticizing SeaWorld’s treatment of orcas, sparked public outrage, and company profits have taken a hit. The marine mammal giant has also faced several lawsuits this year, including one by Earth Island’s IMMP, arguing that SeaWorld has misled the public about the health and wellbeing of captive orcas.

In October, the California Coastal Commission voted to ban SeaWorld San Diego from breeding orcas in captivity and to restrict transfer of whales. (SeaWorld has said it will sue the Commission over these restrictions.) And just last week, California Representative Adam Schiff announced that he will introduce a bill in Congress to phase out orca captivity throughout the United States. If passed, the bill would ban breeding, import and export, and wild capture of orcas.

Given the timing of SeaWorld’s announcement, many [animal welfare](#) advocates believe it is simply a public relations response to negative publicity, and amounts to nothing more than greenwashing. Referencing the October Coastal Commission vote on orca breeding and transfers, former Coastal Commission chairwoman Sara Wan notes that “[SeaWorld] is still proceeding with their litigation against the Commission and with their captive breeding program as well, proving that this is all a PR stunt for their investors.”

## A Semantic Difference, But No Change

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On Monday SeaWorld CEO Joel Manby acknowledged the benefits that a more positive public image would bring. “People love companies that have a purpose, even for-profit companies,” he told SeaWorld investors in a webcast. “Just look at WholeFoods ... I don’t see any reason why SeaWorld can’t be one of those brands.”

Manby also assured investors that any capital expenditures to spruce up orca tanks at SeaWorld San Diego will be “minimal,” leaving advocates to wonder how exactly the “theatrical” shows will be transformed into a more “natural” and “educational” experience.

What Manby doesn’t seem to understand is that the public is not only upset with the tricks the orcas are forced to perform for large crowds, or the appearance of their tanks—it is the very fact of their captivity and the [suffering](#) it causes. SeaWorld is not phasing out orca shows; it is simply calling these shows by a different name, a semantic difference that makes no difference to the orcas still living in captivity.

To take action, sign IMMP’s petition demanding that SeaWorld begin telling the truth about orca captivity.

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**Source Citation**

Bridgeman, Laura. "Sea World Is Not Ending Orca Exploitation." *Opposing Viewpoints Online Collection*, Gale, 2017. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*, link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/LSNRWI280609651/OVIC?u=j021901003&xid=c399952e. Accessed 6 Dec. 2017. Originally published as "No, SeaWorld Is Not Phasing Out Orca Shows," *Earth Island Journal*, 10 Nov. 2015.

**Gale Document Number:** GALEILSNRWI280609651

