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Why “Blackfish” is Propaganda, not a Documentary

We object to Blackfish because its two central premises are wrong: (1) that life at SeaWorld is harmful for killer whales and for trainers working with these animals, and (2) that SeaWorld has attempted to cover up the facts surrounding the tragic death of trainer Dawn Brancheau in 2010, as well the history of Tilikum, the killer whale involved in that accident. Nothing could be further from the truth.

To make these ultimately false and misleading points, the film conveys falsehoods, manipulates viewers emotionally and relies on questionable filmmaking techniques to create “facts” that support its point of view.

Here's the truth:

1. [Blackfish employs false and emotionally manipulative sequences concerning the collection and separation of killer whales.](#)
2. [The film relies on former SeaWorld employees, most of whom have little experience with killer whales, and others who haven't worked at SeaWorld in nearly 20 years.](#)
3. [The film also relies on animal rights activists masquerading as scientists.](#)
4. [The film spins an entirely fictitious account of Dawn Brancheau's death in order to advance its anti-captivity narrative.](#)

5. [To advance both its anti-captivity narrative and its false theories surrounding Ms. Brancheau's death, the film falsely suggests that Tilikum had become psychotic and aggressive.](#)

6. [The film falsely suggests that important facts about Tilikum were concealed from his trainers and that SeaWorld is indifferent to trainer safety.](#)



[Click Here for 69 Reasons Why You Shouldn't Believe Blackfish](#)

Here are some significant examples with links to supporting documents:

1. Blackfish employs **false and emotionally manipulative sequences concerning the collection and separation of killer whales**: Through stock footage and video mismatched to the narrative, the film implies that SeaWorld collects killer whales from the wild and separates mothers and calves. **NEITHER IS TRUE.**

- **Collection**: The film depicts a killer whale collection in Washington State that occurred 40 years ago. It leaves viewers with three false impressions: (1) that SeaWorld continues to collect whales from the wild to this day; (2) that Tilikum himself was collected by SeaWorld; and (3) that the collections done four decades ago were illegal. None of this is true. SeaWorld does not collect killer whales in the wild, and has not done so *in over 35 years*. Tilikum was not collected by us. And the collections four decades ago were conducted in compliance with federal laws, pursuant to federally-issued permits at that time.
- **Separation**: The film highlights two separations. In one instance, involving a whale named Takara, the film leaves you with the impression she was a calf when separated. In fact, Takara was 12 years old when she was moved. In the second, involving a whale named Kalina, the film misleadingly shows footage of a calf that is only days old. Kalina was moved when she was 4 ½ years old because she was disruptive to her mother and other whales. We do not separate killer whale moms and calves, and in the rare occurrences that we do move whales among our parks, we do so only in order to maintain a healthy social structure.

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2. **The film relies on former SeaWorld employees, most of whom have little experience with killer whales, and others who haven't worked at SeaWorld in nearly 20 years**: These individuals, who speak with apparent authority, have little or no firsthand knowledge of the incidents they describe. Most of them had no experience

with Tilikum, and several never even performed with killer whales in the water. The film's "cast" is completely unfamiliar with current conditions and techniques at SeaWorld, and are certainly in no position to critique a trainer of Dawn Brancheau's caliber or her last interaction with Tilikum.

- The film includes a SeaWorld video of a female trainer riding a killer whale, while one of the cast members, Samantha Berg, talks about her "experience" at Shamu Stadium. This segment misleadingly implies that Ms. Berg had relevant experience when, in fact, the video used in the film was shot 10 years after Ms. Berg had left SeaWorld. The trainer depicted in the video is not Ms. Berg but rather is a current [SeaWorld employee](#). Of just the 3 years Ms. Berg spent working at SeaWorld, she spent only one year working with killer whales and she never conducted direct training with Tilikum.

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3. The film also relies on animal rights activists masquerading as scientists: The film relies heavily on the dubious reflections of scientists who have aggressively campaigned against marine mammal display for decades, and have no expertise with killer whale behavior in captivity. These scientists include Howard Garrett, Lori Marino and Ken Balcomb. [Mr. Garrett, along with cast members Samantha Berg and Carol Ray, joined with PETA in a previously filed lawsuit against SeaWorld](#). In this lawsuit, they equated SeaWorld's work with killer whales as slavery under the 13th Amendment. Although their case was promptly dismissed by the Court, their anti-captivity bias is obvious. [Likewise, the film relies on the statements of David Duffus, a professor of geography and purported expert](#) in the area of killer whale behavior, whom Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) Judge Kenneth Welsch found "[has no expertise in the training of captive killer whales](#)."

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4. The film spins an entirely fictitious account of Dawn Brancheau's death in order to advance its anti-captivity narrative. To support this bias slant, and specifically the idea that Tilikum was a psychotic and violent animal because of captivity, the film engages in a series of false and misleading statements about the circumstances of Ms. Brancheau's death:

- In its opening sequence, the film misleadingly cobbles together separate pieces of innocuous training and performance footage, synched with the actual 911 calls, to mislead the audience into believing it is viewing the actual footage of Ms. Brancheau swimming with Tilikum prior to the fatal incident. In fact, the opening sequence does not depict either Ms. Brancheau or Tilikum, or an attack of any kind. From the date [Tilikum arrived at SeaWorld](#), no one was allowed to swim in the water with Tilikum, and Ms. Brancheau never did so.
- Purely for shock value, the film includes a recording of an EMT technician, subsequently proved to be mistaken, suggesting that Tilikum swallowed Ms. Brancheau's arm during the incident. This is false. This fact was readily available to the filmmaker in the documentation she obtained from the Secretary of Labor, yet was not included.
- The film falsely suggests that SeaWorld "blamed" Ms. Brancheau for her death. We have never done that. She was our colleague and we mourn her loss to this day. The film, however, does blame Ms. Brancheau, and it accomplishes this through former trainers with little or no relevant experience. These trainers were not present on the day she died, and callously presume to critique her interaction with Tilikum.

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5. To advance both its anti-captivity narrative and its false theories surrounding Ms. Brancheau's death, the film falsely suggests that Tilikum had become psychotic and aggressive:

- The film blatantly mischaracterizes the events that led to the death of trainer Keltie Byrne at SeaLand of the Pacific, a park that was never owned or operated by SeaWorld. Tilikum was one of three whales in the sea pen at the time Ms. Byrne drowned, and the jury in the Coroner's Inquest (the Canadian investigation of the incident), which considered the testimony of 19 witnesses, [did not identify any one of the three whales as the leader in the incident](#). Nevertheless, the film claims that Tilikum was the instigator, relying upon an interview given by two local residents. Another key fact never disclosed in the film: David Duffus, who is featured in the film numerous times as an "expert", was the foreman of this very same Coroner's Jury that investigated the SeaLand incident. Mr. Duffus testified that it was inconclusive that Tilikum was primarily responsible for the death of Ms. Byrne.
- The film similarly trades in fictional theories about the circumstances surrounding the death of Daniel Dukes, an intruder who broke into the back area of Shamu Stadium after hours and jumped into Tilikum's pool. The film claims there was a "public relations version" of the death and that Mr. Dukes' death was somehow caused by an act of aggression by Tilikum. A review of the official Sheriff's report reveals that virtually nothing said in the film about our conduct that day is true. In fact, Naomi Rose, Ph.D., an outspoken critic of SeaWorld who actually appears in the credits to Blackfish, was [quoted](#) after the incident as saying "*since the body was found on Tilikum's back, it's unlikely the whale was behaving aggressively.....The whale was probably playing with the man and continued to play with the body after the man died.*"
- What clearly is supported by the facts is that prior to Ms. Brancheau's accident in 2010, Tilikum had engaged in numerous interactions with trainers and veterinarians safely and without incident over a period of 18 years. Tilikum remains at SeaWorld, where he cooperates with trainers, socializes with other killer whales and our [guests](#).

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6. The film falsely suggests that important facts about Tilikum were concealed from his trainers and that SeaWorld is indifferent to trainer safety:

- SeaWorld was aware of Keltie Byrne's death when it acquired [Tilikum](#). We adopted special precautionary [protocols](#) regarding work with Tilikum, including prohibition of performance in-water work. These protocols were impressed upon all trainers who worked with Tilikum, yet the film falsely implies that important safety information about Tilikum and his background were withheld. This is untrue. Nothing was ever concealed from Tilikum's trainers. During the OSHA trial surrounding Ms. Brancheau's accident, SeaWorld provided more than 35 hours of testimony concerning our killer whale program and topics such as our detailed safety protocols and how they are communicated to our trainers. All of this testimony was in the possession of the filmmakers, but ignored by the film.
- The film misrepresents, through the use of footage four decades old, that SeaWorld takes a cavalier approach to safety and qualifications of its trainers. This is completely untrue. The path to becoming a killer whale trainer is rigorous and lengthy: It takes years to be qualified to work with killer whales. The film ignores all the [steps and protocols](#) trainers must take in order to be promoted through the ranks.
- [In addition to our written safety protocols and extensive training processes](#), we have invested tens of millions of dollars in state-of-the art improvements, including lifting floors, underwater cameras, and other both passive and active devices, all of which are tied together in our Emergency Response Program.

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Conclusion

All of the falsehoods and misleading techniques in Blackfish are employed in the service of the film's obvious bias, one that is best revealed near the end of Blackfish by a neuroscientist with no known expertise in killer whales. She claims that all killer whales in captivity are "emotionally destroyed," and "ticking time bombs." These are not the words of science, and indeed, there is not a shred of scientific support for them. Rather, they are the words of animal rights activists whose agenda the film's many falsehoods were designed to advance. They reveal "Blackfish" not as an objective documentary, but as propaganda.

