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Informative Essay

<Clever Title>

Come see Shamu at Sea World! You may not know it, but the orca performing just for you is not Shamu. The real Shamu died in 1971. In fact, the Shamu you see swimming inside the concrete tank could be the same Shamu that has killed three people. If that is the case, the orca you see in front of you is named Tilikum, or Friend in Chinook. Weighing more than 12,500 lbs. and measuring over 22 feet in length, Tillikum, commonly known as Tilly, is the largest orca in captivity. His story began in 1981 when he was born.

After swimming freely in the ocean for two years, Tilikum was captured off the coast of Ireland. He was separated from his mother and the rest of his pod. Orcas, even the males, stay with the pods they are born into for their entire lives. After Tillikum’s capture, his pod vocalized loudly and followed the boat he was being held on until they could travel no further.

Once on land, Tilikum was enclosed in a small cement tank in a zoo near Reykjavík, Iceland for a year before being transferred to a marine park. He was brought to Sealand, a small park in Canada where he was placed in a 100x50 ft tank that was 35 ft deep. Food deprivation was often used as a training technique.

Tilikum was not alone in his small tank. He was placed with two females who were constantly fighting for dominance. Orca pods have their own distinct vocalizations, so even though Tilly had company, he most likely could not easily communicate with his tank-mates. Tilikum was attacked and raked by their teeth constantly. Raking is a natural behavior in the wild, but in the wild, orcas can escape their punishment by swimming away. In captivity, Tilikum and other victims of raking have no way of getting away from their attackers. At night, the orcas were put in metal tanks even smaller than the one they were kept in during the day. Inside the tanks, there was no light source, so the orcas were kept in darkness for 14 hours a day.

On February 21, 1991, Tilikum along with his tank-mates claimed their first victim. A trainer’s foot slipped into the pool where Tilikum grabbed it and pulled her to the bottom of the tank. The three orcas passed her around until she drowned. After her death, Sealand closed and Sea World bought Tilikum.

In Sea World, many of the trainers and staff were unaware of his previous killing, and he would go on to kill two more times. The first incident occurred when a man broke into Sea World at night and must have decided to go for a swim with Shamu. He was found the next morning displayed across the back of the orca. Tilikum’s third and most recent killing was that of his trainer, Dawn Brancheau. During a show, Tilikum took hold of her ponytail and dragged her into the water. He proceeded to drown her, break some of her bones, and scalp her.

Though Tilikum has killed three people, he is still being used in shows today though there are some new safety precautions. Trainers are no longer allowed to enter the water with the whale and will sometimes work behind a protective barrier to keep them separated from the whale. Tilikum also plays a major part in the breeding program. 56% of the whales in captivity share his genes. His contribution to the breeding program is very valuable because he will likely pass along his large size.

There is much debate around the subject of keeping or releasing Tilikum into the wild or a sea pen. Many people believe that Tilikum has served his time in captivity and should be reunited with his family, if that is at all possible. It is unknown if Tilikum would be fit for release. He is still young and healthy, but would need to relearn how to survive in the wild. The state of his teeth would not help him survive as they have all been drilled and filed down due to common dental procedures carried out in SeaWorld.