



Captive Marine Mammals: The Journey Back to the Wild

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For decades, marine parks kept orcas, dolphins, and seals in **captivity**, in pools far smaller than their true home in the open ocean. Beginning in the 1990s, marine biologists started asking a harder question: could an animal that had been raised, or trapped, in a tank ever be **rehabilitated** and returned to the wild? Two famous cases, Springer the orca and Keiko the "Free Willy" whale, gave very different answers.

In January 2002, an **orphaned** orca calf was discovered alone in Puget Sound, nearly 400 kilometers from the territory of her **pod**. Scientists identified her as Springer by her unique calls and eye markings. After a careful **rescue**, veterinarians treated her in a sea pen, then transported her by boat to Johnstone Strait, British Columbia, and released her near her relatives. Springer swam off with her family within hours, and by 2017 she had given birth to two calves of her own.

Keiko's story unfolded differently. Captured off Iceland in 1979 and later famous for playing "Willy" in the 1993 film *Free Willy*, Keiko spent years in small tanks in Mexico City and Oregon. A multi-million-dollar rehabilitation program flew him back to Iceland in 1998, and in 2002 he was finally **released** into the open ocean. Instead of joining a wild **pod**, Keiko swam roughly 1,400 kilometers to Norway in search of human company, letting tourists swim with him. He never fully **reintegrated** with wild orcas, and he died of pneumonia in December 2003 — a partial success that still shaped every release that followed.

Dolphins and seals have an easier path back to the wild. Studies of rehabilitation programs report that between 10 and 100 percent of released dolphins, seals, and other marine mammals **survive** long-term, depending on how long they spent in **captivity** and how well they relearn to catch live fish. The longer an animal is separated from its natural **population**, the harder reintegration tends to become.

These cases keep alive an **ethical** debate that marine science has not settled: should any healthy marine mammal ever be held in captivity, even for research or education? Springer and Keiko sit at opposite ends of that argument — one a clear success story, the other a costly reminder of just how hard freedom can be to relearn once it has been lost.

A. Vocabulary

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|----------------------|--|
| 1. captivity ____ | a. the total number of a particular kind of animal living in an area |
| 2. rehabilitate ____ | b. to save someone or something from a dangerous situation |
| 3. orphaned ____ | c. to successfully bring something back into a group it was separated from |
| 4. pod ____ | d. the state of being kept in a confined space, not free in the wild |
| 5. rescue ____ | e. to help an injured or unhealthy animal return to a healthy condition |
| 6. release ____ | f. having lost one's parents or family group |
| 7. reintegrate ____ | g. a small group of whales or dolphins that live and travel together |
| 8. survive ____ | h. to set free from captivity |
| 9. population ____ | i. to continue living, especially after a difficult event |
| 10. ethical ____ | j. relating to what is morally right or wrong |



B. True or False

1. Springer the orca was found alone and far from her pod in January 2002. ____
2. Springer was released back into the ocean near her relatives in British Columbia. ____
3. Keiko was captured off the coast of Iceland in 1979. ____
4. After his release in 2002, Keiko immediately joined a wild orca pod and never approached humans again. ____
5. Keiko died in Iceland in 2003. ____
6. Studies show that 10 to 100 percent of released marine mammals survive long-term, depending on the study. ____
7. Every rehabilitated dolphin or seal fails to survive after release. ____
8. Springer has had at least one calf of her own since her release. ____
9. Scientists agree completely that keeping marine mammals in captivity is always ethical. ____



C. Fill in the Blanks

Word Bank: captivity, rehabilitate, release, survive, reintegrate

1. Marine biologists wanted to know if an animal could be _____ and returned safely to the wild.
2. After her rescue, Springer was treated in a sea pen before her _____ near her pod's territory.
3. Unlike Springer, Keiko never fully _____ with a wild orca pod after his release.
4. Studies show that many rehabilitated dolphins and seals _____ long-term after they are set free.
5. The years Keiko spent in _____ made his return to the wild especially difficult.

D. Comprehension Questions

1. Why did marine biologists begin questioning whether captive marine mammals could return to the wild?
2. Describe how Springer was rescued and reintegrated with her pod.
3. In what ways was Keiko's release similar to Springer's, and in what ways was it different?
4. According to research on dolphin and seal rehabilitation, what factors affect whether a released animal survives?
5. What ethical question do Springer's and Keiko's stories raise about keeping marine mammals in captivity?

E. Discussion Questions

1. Should marine parks and aquariums be allowed to keep healthy orcas and dolphins in captivity for education and research? Defend your position.
2. Keiko's release cost millions of dollars and did not fully succeed. Was the project still worthwhile? Why or why not?
3. What conditions would you require before releasing a rehabilitated marine mammal back into the wild?



Answer Key

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A. Vocabulary: 1-d, 2-e, 3-f, 4-g, 5-b, 6-h, 7-c, 8-i, 9-a, 10-j

B. True/False: 1-T, 2-T, 3-T, 4-F, 5-F, 6-T, 7-F, 8-T, 9-F

C. Fill Blanks: 1-rehabilitated, 2-release, 3-reintegrated, 4-survive, 5-captivity

D. Comprehension:

1. Marine biologists began questioning whether captive marine mammals could return to the wild as they saw the limits of small marine-park tanks compared to the animals' natural ocean habitat.
2. Springer was found orphaned and alone in Puget Sound; after a rescue and treatment in a sea pen, she was transported to Johnstone Strait, British Columbia, and released near her relatives, with whom she swam off within hours.
3. Both Keiko and Springer were rescued and released back into the ocean, but Springer fully rejoined her pod and later had calves, while Keiko swam toward humans instead of a wild pod and never fully reintegrated before he died.
4. Survival depends on how long the animal spent in captivity and how well it relearns to catch live fish and function without human support.
5. Their stories raise the question of whether any healthy marine mammal should ever be held in captivity, since one release succeeded fully while the other, despite years of effort and millions of dollars, only partly worked.