

Student

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Southern Resident Killer Whales - The Species Facing Extinction

A pod of killer whales hover over the mother, full of anticipation. Looking at the mother's thin belly with worry, they strive to send soothing clicks and whistles. A tiny baby orca emerges as a result of the miraculous birth. She is as perfect as the bright moon, her belly pink like the sunset. Yet a second later, the baby sinks without a single newfound breath: dead, as a result of chemicals and oil spills. To start, killer whales are highly intelligent and are very close to family. However, pollutants and oil spills cause deficiencies and bring an early death. In addition, they are being inhumanely held in captivity. Subsequently, the quality and quantity of their main source of food, Chinook salmon, is declining, leading to malnutrition. Fortunately, we can stop this before it's too late. The intelligent killer whales are dismally endangered by human impacts, but we still have time to save them.

Many people think killer whales are vicious, savage whales. However, they are all but that. Southern Resident killer whales are black and white, with a light grey saddle patch behind their dorsal fin. In fact, they are actually a species of dolphin. With the largest brain of dolphin species, they have never been known to fatally wound a human in the wild. As MMC states, they are found in Puget Sound and Washington, British Columbia, and Oregon. With only 73 of them left, they are experts on Chinook salmon - their main source of prey (MMC). Hunting in groups and communicating through clicks, pulsed calls, and whistles, they have a coordinated hunting strategy. All pods are very social, with a variety of roles and family members. Some include

hunters, leaders, and even things like mothers and uncles. Although killer whales are incredibly smart and caring animals, oil spills and pollutants harm these enchanting creatures.

Pollutants and oil spills can bring deficiencies to killer whales throughout the world. Polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, enter food's bloodstream and get eaten by orcas. The chemicals enter the bloodstream of killer whales when they are hungry or working hard (National Geographic). Likewise, even the oldest oil spill or chemicals can have an impact. Plus, the chemicals get more concentrated from generation to generation, also known as biomagnification (NOAA Fisheries). Some effects include damage to the immune system, increased disease risk, and suppressed ability to give birth. Oil spills can be caused by oil tanker traffic, which besides causes harm to killer whales, also makes excessive noise. This is a major hindrance to communication and echolocation, especially when killer whales need to look farther afar for food. As the population and lifespan of killer whales frantically decreases, they are diminished in another way: captivity.

Killer whales are in captivity around the world. The process of capturing killer whales, according to John Crowe and the documentary *Blackfish*, was horrifying. After following a pod, bombs were thrown from speed boats and helicopters. When cornered, the young ones were fished out, cornered with a net. The wails of the babies frantically stuck, the family desperately calling, and what was coming next. Dead orcas were slit open, filled with rocks, and tied to an anchor. Killer whales' lifespan can range from 30 to 90 years old (NOAA Fisheries). However, the lives of captive killer whales last for only about 30 years, with a maximum of 35 (Blackfish). By the same token, killer whales swim approximately 40 miles per day, nothing compared to the boundaries of a small metal tank for the rest of their lives (National Geographic). As the documentary *Racing Extinction* states, "If you were in a bathtub for 25 years, don't you think

you'd get a little irritated, aggravated, maybe a little psychotic?" How are these wonderful mammals going to flourish stuck in small metal tanks? Additionally, teeth are very important to most animals. Killer whales need them to kill and eat their prey. In contrast, one quarter of all orcas in captivity have severe tooth damage (National Geographic). As an illustration, one famous orca in captivity, Tilikum, was dejected during his time in SeaWorld, merely doing a few flips and bows each day. Enduring and agonizing life filled with punishment and pain, he lashed out multiple times. While some marine parks continue to capture killer whales, orcas in the wild are suffering from malnutrition.

Certain species of killer whales such as the Southern Resident killer whales are perishing quickly due to fading masses of Chinook salmon. Habitat destruction of dams prevents fish from entering the ocean. When killer whales are starved, they don't have enough milk to feed their young, leading to less and less reproduction. Chinook salmon, otherwise known as king salmon, is a very common fish that you may have seen in your grocery store. They are being overfished by the day, and what's left is contaminated with chemicals such as flame retardants and cocaine (New York Times). Chinook salmon is decreasing quickly, while at least 723 Chinook are needed to feed all of the Southern Residents per day (phys.org). As a result of overfishing, some populations of Chinook salmon are already endangered or extinct. As you can see, there is a major wipe-out issue, but here are some ways you can help.

Everyone has a voice, and you can start by adding yours to campaigns and protests. This will help release killer whales from the harmful hands of humans. You can also tell your friends and family to not buy tickets to see orcas in captivity. This will decrease business and cause a downfall of money, discouraging SeaWorld and other marine parks from capturing orcas. Even if you think it won't, it will make a difference. Similarly, using natural products will help reduce

the amount of chemicals entering the ocean. Moreover, eating sustainable food and spreading awareness will help bring attention to the killer whales that are slowly fading away. If we all strive to make a seemingly small difference, you can help save killer whales from treacherous extinction.

The majestic Southern Resident killer whales are at the edge of extinction and need to be rescued. In spite of the wonderful features of killer whales, pollutants and oil spills cause substantial harm to these poor mammals. Furthermore, orcas are trapped in captivity, living short horrendous lives. To add, other factors such as malnutrition bring starvation and defects. On the contrary, we still have time to take action and turn the table. Campaigns, wise actions, and spreading awareness will help make a difference for these unique creatures. It is up to you to make a difference. Even the smallest donation can make a big impact and get the population of the spectacular killer whales back on track. As an old Chinese proverb once said, “It is better to light one candle than curse the darkness.”

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