

## **Case 5: Lolita the Lonely Whale**

On August 8, 1970, a capture team outfitted with speedboats and rifles drove more than 80 Southern Resident killer whales into Penn Cove, located in Washington State's Puget Sound. Seven young orcas were separated from the group, netted, and removed from the ocean. The team's leaders — Ted Griffin and Don Goldsberry — eventually sold the orcas into the billion-dollar marine park industry. An additional four juveniles and one female adult orca died during the struggle. Griffin and Goldsberry attempted to cover up the deaths by weighing down and sinking the bodies, but they eventually washed up on shore. The public outcry regarding the incident led to a law banning the capture of marine wildlife in Puget Sound.

Lolita is the only surviving orca taken from Puget Sound. She has spent over three decades performing, seven days a week, at Miami Seaquarium. Her home is about the size of a hotel swimming pool, which prevents her from engaging in many normal activities such as hunting for food, swimming 75-100 miles per day, using sonar, and living in community with other orcas. Lolita originally had another Southern Resident killer whale named Hugo as a tank mate, but Hugo died of an aneurysm in 1980. Lolita's isolation has led many to call her "the loneliest orca on the planet." Indeed, her tank does not meet USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service requirements stipulated by law. The Seaquarium has been promising to build a new tank since 1979.

A global coalition of activists, including marine biologists, has long advocated for Lolita's retirement and release back into Puget Sound, where she can rejoin her family. Killer whales have extremely strong family bonds. Offspring stay with their mothers for life. It is likely, although not guaranteed, that Lolita's family would allow her to rejoin the group. The Washington State-based Center for Whale Research has developed a plan that would prepare Lolita to return to the wild. She would spend time in a protected, netted-off cove in Puget Sound while being taught how to hunt for food, experiencing the rhythms of the sea, and listening to the vocalizations of her family. Orcas are actually large dolphins, and many captive dolphins have been successfully released back into the wild.

Seaquarium staff say that Lolita is happy and healthy and believe that releasing her back into the ocean would be cruel. They caution that she may encounter the same fate as Keiko, the orca who starred in the movie "Free Willy." Keiko was reportedly rejected by other wild killer whales, although he was never able to reunite with his biological

family. Seaquarium subsequently filed a permit to re-capture Keiko, allegedly for breeding purposes with Lolita. Keiko died of pneumonia about a year after his release.

**Study questions:**

1. Should Lolita be released back to the wild? Does the fact that we cannot be certain she will be accepted by her family affect your judgment about this?
2. Is it ethical for humans to capture wild animals for the purpose of making money? Is there an ethical difference between capturing wild animals and raising animals in captivity?
3. Some people claim that theme parks like Seaquarium and SeaWorld are good because they educate the public about wildlife. Do you find this argument convincing?

**Author:** Mary Hubl lives in Ann Arbor. She telecommutes from her home office to Omaha, Nebraska-based company [Vic Gutman & Associates](#), where [Mary is vice president, nonprofit services](#). She assists nonprofit organizations with grant writing and developing/implementing fundraising programs. Mary has a BA in French and international relations from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and an MA in international politics and economics and modern European history from George Washington University. She also enjoys yoga, reading, traveling and competing in triathlons, as well as spending time with her two teenage sons and husband. Mary is a passionate animal advocate and volunteers as a cat comforter at the [Humane Society of Huron Valley](#).