Blackfish - Seaworld Bites Back

July 15th, 2013

Consistently, throughout the world promotional tour for Blackfish (http://blackfishmovie.com/), director Gabriela Cowperthwaite always affirmed that during filming and production she repeatedly requested interviews with SeaWorld officials and was flatly declined. As any good documentarian, she wanted a balanced view to present audiences, but SeaWorld was not moved to be part of the film - whatsoever.

And during the long and eventful campaign for Blackfish, despite screenings at festivals all around the world - from Sundance to Sheffield to Moscow - SeaWorld has remained silent but for one short announcement very early on where they dismissed the film based on a: "very preliminary review", since then the company has not responded to any of the press or public.

Until now.

SeaWorld's Vice President of Communications, Fred Jacobs, in reaction to the impending release in the USA and UK (http://blackfishmovie.com/screenings), directly emailed about 50 high profile film reviewers in the US rebutting various points in the film. Mr Jacobs took examples of allegations in the film and responded with what the company consider as corrections. Find the assertions and responses below:
SeaWorld’s Response to the Movie *Blackfish*

**SeaWorld Assertion 1**

The insinuation that SeaWorld stocks its parks with killer whales captured from the wild. In fact, SeaWorld hasn’t collected a killer whale from the wild in more than 35 years; more than 80% of the killer whales at SeaWorld were born there or in other zoological facilities.

**Film Response:**

It is not transparent to us whether SeaWorld has watched the film carefully. We were very clear in the film that the majority of whales at SeaWorld parks these days are captive-born. In fact, we have a graphic showing that many of those captive-born calves are Tilikum’s offspring, the whale who has a proven track record of killing 3 people.

That said, there is a whale called Morgan at a marine park in Spain which houses SeaWorld-owned whales. Morgan was caught in the wild and was placed in Loro Parque where she will be bred and perform alongside the other SeaWorld whales.

**SeaWorld Assertion 2**

The assertion that killer whales in the wild live more than twice as long as those living at SeaWorld. While research suggests that some wild killer whales can live as long as 60 or 70 years, their average lifespan is nowhere near that. Nor is it true that killer whales in captivity live only 25 to 35 years. Because we’ve been studying killer whales at places like SeaWorld for only 40 years or so, we don’t know what their lifespans might be—though we do know that SeaWorld currently has one killer whale in her late 40s and a number of others in their late 30s.

**Film Response**

In the wild, average lifespan is 30 for males, 50 for females. Their estimated maximum life span is 60-70 years for males and 80-90 years for females. In captivity, most orcas die in their teens and 20s and only a handful have made it past 35. The annual mortality or death rate for orcas is 2.5 times higher in captivity than it is in the wild. These are not controversial data.

In the film, we depict what seems to be a deliberate attempt by SeaWorld to misrepresent these well documented data to their visitors.

**SeaWorld Assertion 3**

The implication that unlike killer whales in the wild, killer whales in zoos or parks—and specifically Tilikum, the whale involved in Dawn Brancheau’s death—are routinely bullied by other whales. The word “bullying” is meaningless when applied to the behavior of an animal like a killer whale. Whales live in a social setting with a dominance hierarchy, both at SeaWorld and in the wild. They express dominance in a variety of ways, including using their teeth to “rake” other whales, in the open ocean as well as in parks.
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**Film Response**

SeaWorld does not show an understanding of basic behavioral biology in this statement. It is true that social animals like orcas do have dominance hierarchies and they are maintained via behavioral interactions. The film asserts that in the wild, whales can also flee conflict. Whales at SeaWorld cannot escape from a negative social interaction and are therefore confronted with conflicts that have proven to be injurious and even fatal.

Furthermore in the wild, these hierarchies are among family groups and are maintained with minimal aggression. In the wild, no orca has ever been known to seriously injure or kill another orca, inside or outside of their social group, in any interaction. Certainly minor injuries occur, and scars may remain (including nicks in dorsal fins and scratches on saddles), but no serious injury inflicted on one wild orca by another orca has ever been recorded, when observing live animals or in examining dead ones.

**SeaWorld Assertion 4**

The accusation that SeaWorld callously breaks up killer whale families. SeaWorld does everything possible to support the social structures of all marine mammals, including killer whales. It moves killer whales only when doing so is in the interest of their long-term health and welfare. And despite the misleading footage in the film, the only time it separates unweaned killer whale calves from their mothers is when the mothers have rejected them.

**Film Response**

The calf-mother separations that are mentioned in the film both involve two of the most responsible and bonded mothers in SeaWorld’s collection, both of whom have had multiple calves taken from them. The separations are said to be driven primarily by introducing new breeding options to other SeaWorld parks and by fulfilling entertainment and other husbandry needs.

We are surprised that SeaWorld has brought up calf rejection, an issue the film does not address and a phenomenon that is extremely rare in wild orcas. In the wild, females generally have their first calf around 13-16 years of age. Because SeaWorld has bred their females as early as 5-6 years of age, these females have not learned proper social behavior, they have not learned how to mother a calf, and may ultimately reject and injure their calves.

**SeaWorld Assertion 5**

The accusation that SeaWorld mistreats its killer whales with punishment-based training that’s designed to force them to learn unnatural behaviors. SeaWorld has never used punishment-based training on any of its animals, including Tilikum, only positive reinforcement. And the behaviors it reinforces are always within the killer whale’s natural range of behaviors.
Film Response

Again, we are unsure whether SeaWorld has undertaken a careful review of Blackfish. The film never depicts SeaWorld as using punishment. We are confident the trainers would not acquiesce to such overt tactics. Yet although these accounts are not depicted in the film, multiple trainers are aware of incidents where animals may be fed substandard amounts of fish before VIP shows to encourage their cooperation or where a male killer whale might be put in with a group of whales who have been previously aggressive with him in order to encourage complicit behavior.

We find the claim that SeaWorld killer whales perform behaviors “within the killer whale’s natural range of behaviors,” to be false. Wild killer whales are never observed performing front flips or vertical jumps to touch objects, neither have they been observed to spin 360 degrees on land. A killer whale supporting a human who rides, "surfs", or leaps from the animal’s rostrum does not fall within a wild killer whale’s repertoire either. These are unnatural, trained behaviors only observed in marine parks and reinforced by food.

SeaWorld Assertion 6

The accusation that SeaWorld trainers were not adequately informed about Tilikum. From the time Tilikum first arrived at SeaWorld, all trainers were warned—both as part of their training and in writing—that they were not allowed in the water with him. In fact, as was widely reported and covered at length in the OSHA proceedings, Tilikum has always had his own set of training protocols and only the most experienced trainers have been allowed to work with him.

Film Response

The film asserts that trainers were not told the details of what happened to Keltie Byrne when Tilikum arrived at SeaWorld and not told the details of what happened to Daniel Dukes at the time of his death. The details behind the reason for Tilikum’s training protocols were not adequately explained, and Tilikum was often characterized as having been “associated” with previous deaths, and was described, even in the OSHA trials as an animal who “was possessive of objects” that fell into the water. The OSHA legal counsel had to push SeaWorld to admit that these objects sometimes included humans.

SeaWorld Assertion 7

The accusation that SeaWorld tried to “spin” the story of Dawn Brancheau’s death, changing its story several times and blaming her for the tragedy. As the movie itself shows, it was local law enforcement—not SeaWorld—that issued the initial report that Dawn had accidentally fallen into the water. SeaWorld’s account of what happened—that Tilikum had grabbed Dawn’s ponytail and pulled her in—never varied. And the company has never blamed Dawn for what happened. (The person in the film who did was not a SeaWorld spokesperson.)

Film Response

It is our understanding that the local law enforcement representative who claimed Dawn Brancheau slipped and fell, issued this public statement after he emerged from a private meeting with top SeaWorld officials. Video documentation exists depicting SeaWorld Animal Training staff standing
SeaWorld’s Response to the Movie *Blackfish*

directly behind him as he makes this apparent “misstatement”. We are unclear as to whether SeaWorld is accusing the Orange County Sheriff’s Office of fabricating this story.

Several SeaWorld trainers to whom we spoke claim that SeaWorld management and senior management routinely and repeatedly blamed Dawn Brancheau for being too complacent.

**Seaworld Assertion 8**

The assertion that Tilikum attacked and killed Dawn Brancheau because he was driven crazy by his years in captivity. Tilikum did not attack Dawn. All evidence indicates that Tilikum became interested in the novelty of Dawn’s ponytail in his environment and, as a result, he grabbed it and pulled her into the water.

**Film Response**

Although eye witness accounts and a video of events just prior to the take-down seem to strongly contradict the notion that Dawn was pulled in by her ponytail, it is most important to note that according to SeaWorld’s own Management during courtroom testimony, Tilikum was desensitized to ponytails and therefore did not find them a novelty. The brutal nature of the prolonged, aggressive attack and the facts in the autopsy strongly suggest that Tilikum’s behavior was anything but novel curiosity. These facts were internally corroborated by senior level training staff at SeaWorld.

More on this breaking story can be found at:

Outside Online: Taking on SeaWorld: let the voyage begin (http://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/nature/Taking-on-SeaWorld-Let-the-Voyage-Begin.html)

Buisness Week: SeaWorld fights back at the critical documentary


Salon: Free Willy, for real: SeaWorld has got to go (http://www.salon.com/2013/07/20/free_willy_for_real_seaworld_has_got_to_go/)


Jezebel: SeaWorld is scared Blackfish will make you never want to visit again (http://jezebel.com/seaworld-is-scared-blackfish-will-make-you-never-want-t-831895871)