

‘RESCUING’ CETACEANS: COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATION OR JUST LINING AQUARIA’S CORPORATE COFFERS?

Introduction

The Triple-R’s (Rescue, Rehabilitation, Release) of cetaceans are positive conservation measures, if conducted appropriately (Figure 1). However, many aquariums/zoos use rescues as a source for collecting cetaceans to help stock their facilities. These animals then typically become commodities, exploited through trading, for breeding and in pay-to-experience programs for public entertainment. Such inappropriate use of ‘rescued’ cetaceans not only promotes poor conservation outcomes, but is consistent with them, as the individuals are effectively prevented from contributing to the wild populations. The industry then falsely portrays these ‘rescues’ as conservation initiatives, whilst also declaring such ‘rescues’ as justification for commercially keeping cetaceans. These claims are, in effect, nothing more than ‘greenwashing’ by the corporations.

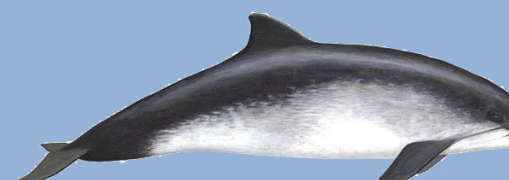
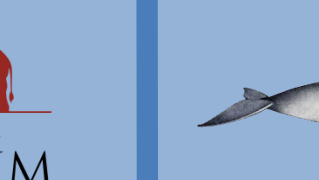
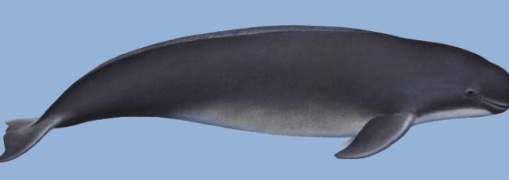
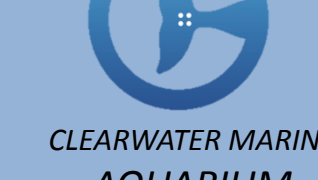
Methods

To determine the extent of this practice, public records of ‘rescued’ cetaceans, where available, were assessed. Some case-history details of a ‘rescued’ orca (*Orcinus orca*), known as Morgan, are presented. To facilitate successful Triple-R’s, suitable Cetacean Sanctuaries are proposed and briefly discussed.

RESULTS

At least 13 species of cetaceans (Table 1) have been subjected to this method of exploitation, under the guise of ‘rescues’. At least 13 facilities have been involved, with *SeaWorld*, USA, implicated in more ‘rescued’ cetaceans being used for commercial purposes than any other company (at least (n = 5) species), followed by *Dolfinarium Harderwijk*, Netherlands, and *Vancouver Aquarium*, Canada, both using at least three species each.

A ‘rescued’ orca, known as Morgan has been used commercially by three different companies in three countries. After being found emaciated and alone off the Dutch coast, she was captured by the local aquarium *Dolfinarium Harderwijk*, which is recognised for its historic ‘cetacean laundering’ for *SeaWorld*. The special permit for Morgan’s capture included caveats of ‘no display’ and ‘requirement-to-release’. Despite these, shortly after capture she was displayed in impoverished conditions (Figure 2). Eighteen months later she was shipped to *Loro Parque*, Spain and is now used in circus-like shows (Figure 3). Furthermore, she is used in a breeding program conducted at *Loro Parque* (using *SeaWorld* males and with the progeny allegedly for *SeaWorld*). Her captive born progeny, so ‘laundered’, could then legally be traded and shipped worldwide.

Table 1. ‘Rescued’ cetacean species (n = 13) and the facilities (n = 13) using them for commercial purposes. (note: number of individuals not indicated)					
	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>			<i>Orcinus orca</i>	  
	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>			<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	 
	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>	  		<i>Pseudorca crassidens</i>	
	<i>Grampus griseus</i>			<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>	
	<i>Lagenorhynchus obliquidens</i>	 		<i>Stenella frontalis</i>	 
	<i>Neophocaena phocaenoides</i>			<i>Steno bredanensis</i>	
				<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	  

DISCUSSION

International conservation treaties, policies and laws need to be elevated to better protect rescued cetaceans from exploitation and to ensure respectful treatment of these sentient beings. Appropriate rehabilitation conditions should be mandatory, whilst all breeding and public displays/interactions should be illegal when used for commercial purposes.



Figure 4. Concept of possible Cetacean Sanctuary, showing bay-pens (which can be added or removed), husbandry pens to facilitate care and barrier nets with boat-warning buoys for added protection. See legend for observation and information centers, walking trails etc.



Figure 1. Many cetaceans are provided human assistance for a wide range of issues such as stranding or entanglement. In most cases the animals are returned to the ocean, as this pilot whale was. However, that isn’t always the case and the fate of those held in permanent captivity is less than ideal and cannot ethically, nor morally be labelled as a ‘rescue’.

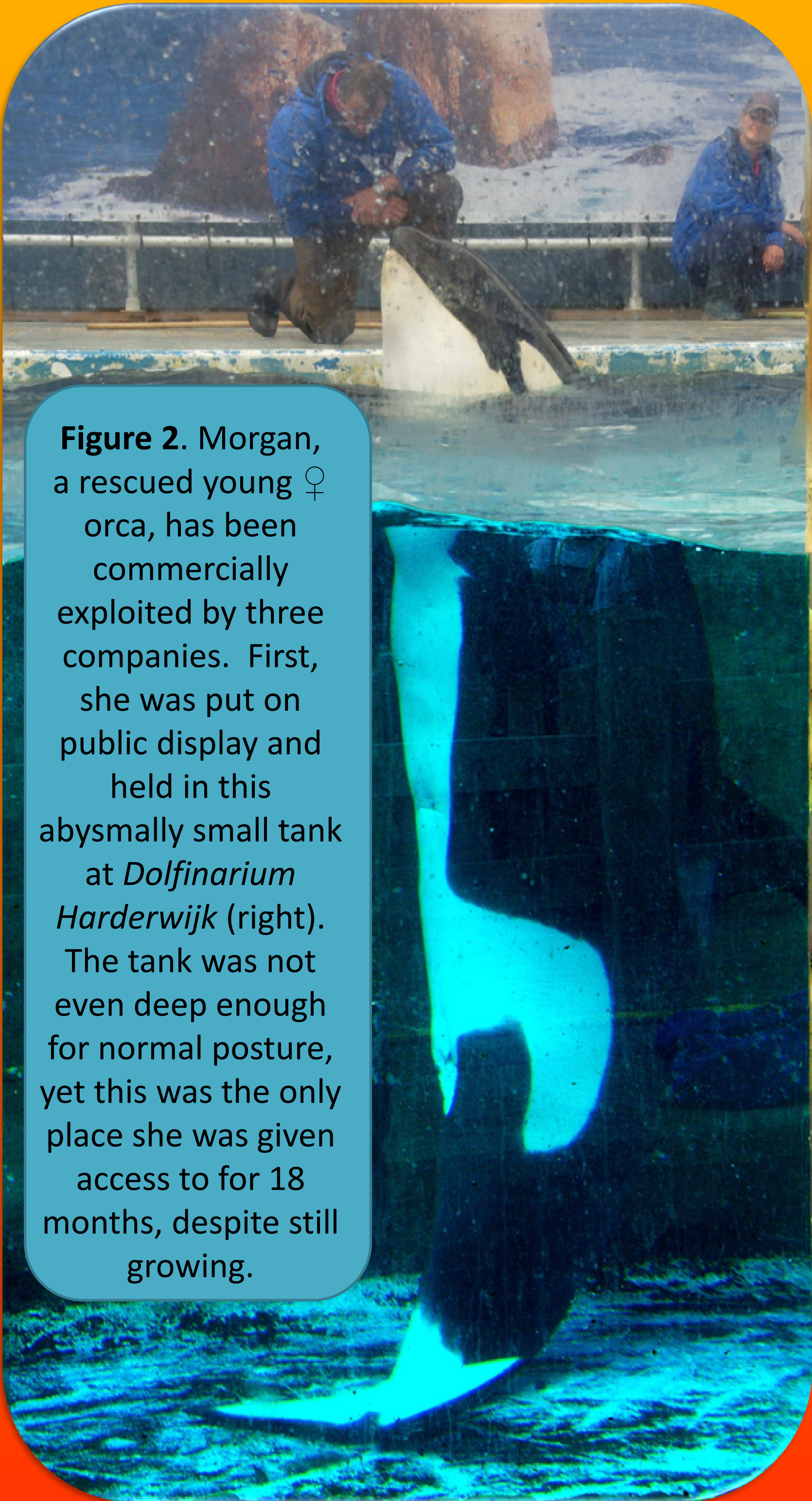


Figure 2. Morgan, a rescued young ♀ orca, has been commercially exploited by three companies. First, she was put on public display and held in this abysmally small tank at *Dolfinarium Harderwijk* (right). The tank was not even deep enough for normal posture, yet this was the only place she was given access to for 18 months, despite still growing.



Figure 3. Morgan (highlighted, left), was next shipped to *Loro Parque* and used to perform circus-like tricks in shows.

Such actions would minimize the inappropriate taking of rescued cetaceans for commercial use and would increase the likelihood that organisations instigate rescues for true compassionate conservation, not for corporate gain or greenwashing. Furthermore, it would encourage the prompt rehabilitation and return to the wild of rescued cetaceans.

To facilitate successful Triple-R’s, suitable Cetacean Sanctuaries are proposed. These should be developed with the needs of the specific species in mind (such as water temperature). Preferably they should be scalable (expand when numbers increase, reduce when numbers drop – allowing costs to be kept to a minimum). When necessary, long-term care could be provided at such locations. If applicable, daily visits by the public could be facilitated, but not for commercial gain.



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