

Report recommends expanding SeaWorld killer whale tanks

September 25 2015, by Julie Watson

SeaWorld should be allowed to build a much larger facility for its killer whales, a state government report recommended Friday in a move that outrages animal rights groups that see it as a step toward breeding more orcas in captivity.

The staff of the California Coastal Commission made the recommendations ahead of the regulatory board's Oct. 8 meeting where it is scheduled to vote on SeaWorld's permit request for the \$100 million expansion.

The staff recommends attaching nine conditions to the permit that include requiring SeaWorld to not house newly captured orcas at its San Diego location. The report states that while no orcas have been taken from U.S. waters since the 1980s, the new facility could "potentially create the incentive to commit such capture in the future, which would be an adverse impact to California's coastal resources and to a species of special biological significance."

Tens of thousands have written the commission about the issue. Many expressed opposition to the plans, calling the expansion a marketing ploy to boost its plummeting marine-theme park attendance and not address their belief that orcas should not be in captivity at all. Attendance has dropped since the release of the popular 2013 documentary "Blackfish," which suggested SeaWorld's treatment of captive orcas provokes violent behavior.

Some environmentalists fear the bigger facility will be used by SeaWorld to breed more orcas.

"This is not limiting them in any way. In fact, this would do the opposite," said Sara Wan, a former commissioner who now works as a consultant for the Animal Defense Legal Fund. "They could breed all the orcas they want with this facility and ship them all over the world."

As part of its expansion, SeaWorld proposes demolishing portions of its 1995 "Shamu" killer whale facility, which included a 1.7 million gallon pool. In its place would be a 5.2 million gallon pool and a smaller 450,000 gallon pool. There would be no changes to seating at the existing stadium.

SeaWorld says in its proposal that the orca population housed at the new facility would not significantly increase—which would meet one of the nine conditions recommended by the staff.

Under the other conditions, SeaWorld could not house any orcas captured in the wild after February 2014 at its San Diego location, with the exception of rescued [killer whales](#) approved by one or more government agencies for rehabilitation or deemed as unfit for release into the wild. And it could not use any genetic material from wild whales caught after February 2014. The conditions would only apply to its San Diego park, since the coastal commission only has jurisdiction over that location.

SeaWorld says it would agree to the conditions and has not collected a killer whale in more than 35 years. About 80 percent of the killer whales in its care were born at SeaWorld parks or other zoos. It houses 11 orcas at its San Diego park.

The project, called "Blue World," would open in 2018 if approved. It

would reflect "more natural, dynamic and adaptable environments," the company said. SeaWorld also has promised to fund additional research on the animals along with programs to protect ocean health and whales in the wild.

"The proposed Blue World project will provide not only an expanded habitat for whales, but also new opportunities for researchers to conduct studies that will benefit killer whales and other cetaceans in the wild," said Paul Ponganis, a researcher at Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

The Orlando, Florida-based company said the renovations had been in the works for some time and were not in response to the documentary "Blackfish." SeaWorld says the animals are well treated and their shows help garner support for conservation.

The company's stock has fallen 50 percent over the past two years, and attendance at the original SeaWorld, in San Diego, has lagged behind its other theme parks. Legislators in California also proposed banning performances featuring [orcas](#), which kept criticism of SeaWorld in the news. The company has blamed competition from other theme parks for its overall drop in attendance of about 2 percent.

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