

After her death in a Miami tank, push to send Lolita home to the Pacific continues

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While the killer whale best known as Lolita was alive, the Lummi Nation led a campaign to free her from the Miami Seaquarium and bring her home to her native waters of Washington state. The effort continues

after the animal's death last week at an estimated age of 57.

"She was taken from her home and moved across the country," said Anthony Hillaire, chairman of the governing body for the Lummi people, the original inhabitants of Washington's northernmost coast, where the [orca](#) was captured in 1970. "It's time for her to come home."

While at odds with the Seaquarium for years over the park's ownership of the orca the Lummi call Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut, Hillaire said recent days seemed to bring consensus with park leadership on the animal's final steps. He said Lummi representatives plan to fly to Georgia where a necropsy was recently completed and take possession of the orca's cremated remains.

From there, they plan to fly back to Washington for a ceremonial farewell to the orca that merits the spiritual weight the Lummi give a [killer whale](#) they've consider having been abducted from their shared home.

"We view her as our relative," Hillaire said. "We feel her story."

Lummi advocacy helped reshape [public perception](#) of what was once the Seaquarium's star attraction, an orca that is also called Tokitae based on another indigenous name for Lolita. In 2018, Lummi representatives traveled 3,000 miles from Seattle to Miami with a totem pole carved to honor Tokitae (often shortened to Toki).

"Tokitae's story needs to be heard and needs to be shared. It's the right thing to do," Jay Julius, then chairman of the Lummi Nation, said at the Miami event. "We have much concern for the conditions she is kept in today."

A more sensitive conclusion than Hugo had

At the time, the Seaquarium opposed moving Lolita to natural waters. Last year, under new ownership, the for-profit theme park agreed to a plan backed by the non-profit Friends of Toki to eventually move the orca to a netted pen off the Washington coast. That plan existed only on paper when Lolita died on Aug. 18 in her tank, with a potential relocation still months if not years away assuming the appropriate permits and sea-bottom rights could be acquired.

A Lummi ceremony would be a stark contrast to the arrangements of a former Seaquarium orca, Hugo, which died of a brain aneurysm in 1980. Photos show the 10,000-pound orca being lowered with a crane into a county-owned landfill in South Dade.

That kind of a grisly option hasn't been discussed for Lolita, and it's a situation that would be blocked by county government, said Natalia Jaramillo, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava's spokesperson. "If that question came to us, the county would deny," she said.

Some Seaquarium critics faulted the for-profit park for media images captured in the hours after Lolita's death of a crane hoisting her lifeless body out her tank. "You could have delayed the announcement to allow her to at least be lifted out of the pool," said Marni Wood, a former Seaquarium trainer who worked with Lolita before leaving the park in 2018. "Honestly, I couldn't even watch."

A Seaquarium spokesperson was not immediately available for comment.

The Seaquarium mentioned the Lummi Nation in its first statement announcing the death of the orca, who the park referred to as Toki.

"Toki was an inspiration to all who had the fortune to hear her story and

especially to the Lummi Nation that considered her family," the Seaquarium said. "Those who have had the privilege to spend time with her will forever remember her beautiful spirit."

Cremation to come, and a ceremony

The timing of transferring Lolita's remains uncertain. The office of one of Washington's U.S. senators, Democrat Maria Cantwell, tried to slow the University of Georgia's procedure of breaking down the orca's body in order to turn over mostly intact remains to the Lummi representatives. But the Seattle Times reported Thursday that the procedure was already completed, leaving cremation in Athens the best option.

"It was a shock we were not consulted," Hillaire told the newspaper.

In an interview with the Miami Herald, Hillaire said he didn't want to dwell on the post-mortem procedures and instead wanted the focus on the planned trip back to home waters.

There's a ceremony planned Sunday on San Juan Island in Puget Sound to honor Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut, which will include raising the totem pole that made the journey to Miami advocating for the orca's freedom five years ago.

"It's time," he said, "for her to rest."

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