

Orca Tokitae's necropsy shocks Lummi Nation as it works to bring remains home

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The death of Tokitae the southern resident orca on Friday in Miami was a shock to those who had been working to return her to her home waters of the Pacific Northwest, after 53 years in captivity.

And the shocks would continue as a necropsy got underway just hours after the whale's death.

Tokitae's body was trucked that evening from Florida to the University of Georgia where it was cut into pieces and placed in 20 50-gallon barrels, and the larger bones put in bins with the goal of using them to make castings for multiple displays of her skeleton. Incineration of the remains would have been the next step.

But on Saturday morning the office of U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., had tried to slow down the process and requested the body be kept as intact as possible to respect the wishes of the Lummi Nation, said Ansley Lacitis, spokesperson and deputy chief of staff for the senator.

"It all happened very quickly; there are still some questions that need to be answered," said Tony Hillaire, chairman of the Lummi Nation, which has worked for decades to return Tokitae to her home waters. "It was a shock we were not consulted."

Since then, the Nation has decided cremation, after all, would be the best way to return Tokitae, bringing her ashes home by plane.

The decision was reached after discussion with the Eduardo Albor, CEO of The Dolphin Company, owner of the Seaquarium in Miami, where Tokitae died Friday, Hillaire said. Albor had stressed that the necropsy had to happen as fast as possible in order to get the best answers as to why she died, Hillaire said.

"They want answers," Hillaire said. "They shared their hearts with us that it was traumatic for them, too."

The decision was also made in part because of the extensive dissection of her remains. "We don't want her sitting any more like that, above all

else we want to take care of her spirit," Hillaire said. "I struggled with it, that feeling of we need to fight, to be angry about this. We need to set that down and take care of her."

Gregory Trevor, associate vice president and spokesperson for the University of Georgia, referred all inquiries to the Seaquarium. A spokesperson for the Seaquarium said she had no information about the necropsy.

The timing of the cremation and return of Tokitae's remains has not yet been determined.

But some arrangements are underway: A small group of Lummi Nation [tribal members](#) will go to the university to beat drums following Tokitae's cremation, and Lummi Nation elder Raynell Morris will carry her ashes home on the plane. Once the orca's ashes arrive, a larger group from the Lummi Nation will escort her home. Cultural leaders will decide how to put her to rest.

Meanwhile, a public celebration of her life will be held Sunday from noon to 3 p.m. at Jackson Beach Park in Friday Harbor on San Juan Island.

The late chief Bill James drew an analogy between Tokitae's capture and the government taking of Indian children from their families and forcible placement in boarding schools. He called on the Nation to return the whale, renamed Sk'aliCh'elh-tenaut for the village where she was captured, to her home waters.

Morris traveled to Miami on Friday night to fulfill what she said was her sacred obligation under the late chief's directive to bring the orca home.

Morris became gravely ill on the trip. From her hospital bed in Miami

she said Tuesday she had completed her ceremony and prayers for the orca to release her spirit. "I did a little ceremony for her in my room with my drum and cedar and prayer and words, and released her with love and prayer and devotion for her to swim, swim, swim. She is gone. She is free."

Freeing the orca from captivity has been a cause in Washington state for decades. In 1995, then-Gov. Mike Lowry held a news conference declaring he and then-Secretary of State Ralph Munro would bring her home, as a citizen of the state.

Between 1962 and 1976, about 270 orcas were captured in the Northwest, some more than once. Of those whales, at least 12 died during captures and more than 50 were kept for displays. With the death of Tokitae, none remain in captivity.

Orca Network and other groups also worked for decades to free Tokitae. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and others sued for her release, eventually ending the suit after the U.S. Department of Agriculture denied the Seaquarium a license to show the whale in 2022. The Seaquarium repeatedly refused to sell or release her, claiming she was well cared for and better off than the southern residents at risk of extinction in her home waters.

Government inspectors in 2021 reported Tokitae was being fed rotten fish, living in dirty water, and forced to do high speed tricks despite an injury.

Her fortunes seemed about to improve when the Seaquarium changed hands and new owners, in March 2023, announced a commitment to release her within 18 to 24 months. Indianapolis Colts owner Jim Irsay stepped forward with funds to help. In recent months under better diet and care, her health had improved, and her release seemed close at hand.

What matters now is taking care of her spirit, and learning from her teachings, Hillaire said. "Let's talk about what we remember about her, instead of carrying anger in our hearts we want to carry what she taught us, about unity, and bringing us together."

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