

Calif. bill would end SeaWorld killer whale shows

April 8 2014, by Fenit Nirappil

A proposed California bill would force SeaWorld San Diego to stop using killer whales in its iconic shows and to release them from their tanks, the latest blowback that the exotic animal attraction has faced after a documentary film criticized the marine park's animal welfare practices.

The state Assembly will hold its first committee hearing Tuesday on the [bill](#) that is pitting [animal welfare](#) activists against a staple of San Diego's tourism industry. SeaWorld San Diego houses 10 [killer whales](#), which would be moved into a larger sea pen and could not be bred if the Legislature approved the bill and the governor signed it. The bill would also ban the import and export of the animals, and activists are moving to bring similar bills to Florida and Texas where SeaWorld has parks.

"They are too large, too intelligent, too socially complex and too far-ranging to be adequately cared for in captivity," said Naomi Rose, a marine mammal scientist with the Animal Welfare Institute, the bill's sponsor.

SeaWorld has been fighting back against that perception, which executives said is inspired by the 2013 documentary "Blackfish," which its officials say distorts the facts to favor an anti-captivity agenda.

"That argument is not based on credible peer-reviewed science," said John Reilly, president of SeaWorld San Diego Park. "It's based on emotion and a propaganda film."

Bloom introduced the measure in response to "Blackfish," which linked attacks on and deaths of SeaWorld trainers to the mistreatment of the animals and has led to growing public outrage and several celebrities canceling appearances at the park.

Kirra Kotler, a 10-year-old from Malibu, California, who successfully stopped her school's annual field trip to the park, delivered 1.2 million signatures in support of the bill Monday on a flash drive to Assemblyman Anthony Rendon, chairman of the Assembly water, parks and wildlife committee that will hear the bill Tuesday.

SeaWorld officials say their killer whales lead quality lives, and that captive animals allow researchers to study and improve conservation for wild orcas. Reilly said killer whales are a part of almost every San Diego Sea World visitor's experience. The parks draw millions of visitors a year.

"Shamu is synonymous with SeaWorld, and SeaWorld is synonymous with Shamu," said David Koontz, SeaWorld San Diego's director of communications, referring to the park's iconic animal.

SeaWorld would not comment on how the park would change its operations if the bill passed. The publicly traded company expects record revenue in 2013 despite "Blackfish," although recent filings by the Securities and Exchange Commission show attendance has dropped in the first quarter of 2014. SeaWorld attributes that loss to changes in how holidays fall in the calendar year.

Rose, who assisted with "Blackfish," said SeaWorld can change how it handles captive animals and still display its whales for decades.

"We are not talking about shutting down SeaWorld," Rose said. "We are talking about transforming them."

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