

SeaWorld plans bigger killer whale environments (Update)

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In this March 7, 2011 file photo, trainers Joe Sanchez, left, Brian Faulkner and Kelly Aldrich, right, work with killer whales Trua, front, Kayla, center, and Nalani during the Believe show in Shamu Stadium at the SeaWorld Orlando theme park in Orlando, Fla. After more than a year of public criticism of its treatment of killer whales, SeaWorld said Friday, Aug. 15, 2015, that it will build new, larger environments at its theme parks and will fund additional research on the animals along with programs to protect ocean health and whales in the wild. (AP Photo/Phelan M. Ebenhack, File)

After more than a year of public criticism of its treatment of killer whales, SeaWorld said Friday that it will build new, larger environments at its theme parks and will fund additional research on the animals along with programs to protect ocean health and whales in the wild.

The Orlando, Florida, company said the renovations have been in the works for some time and that they are not a response to the documentary "Blackfish" or the criticism of the company that followed the release of the film.

The company's shares, which are trading near their lowest point since SeaWorld listed its stock on public markets last year, rose slightly on the news.

But it remains to be seen if the renovations will fully address concerns about keeping large marine mammals in captivity.

The 2013 documentary "Blackfish" suggested that captivity and SeaWorld's treatment of the whales provoke violent behavior, which in turn has led to the death of trainers. Since the release of the film, a series of entertainers have pulled out of planned performances at SeaWorld parks. SeaWorld also recently said its longtime corporate partnership with Southwest Airlines is ending, and on Wednesday the company reported disappointing second-quarter financial results because of the backlash.

SeaWorld Entertainment Inc. says it will build a tank with 10 million gallons of water at its San Diego park, almost twice the size of the current tank. The new environment will be called the Blue World Project, and SeaWorld said it will include features that will be more stimulating for the whales. Those include a "fast water current" that will allow the whales to swim against moving water.

The facility will open to the public in 2018, and after that, SeaWorld said, it will make similar changes at its Orlando, Florida, and San Antonio locations.

The company said the cost of the project will be in the hundreds of millions of dollars but would not specify the exact budget.

The company is also pledging \$10 million in matching funds to support research focused on threats to killer whales, or orcas, in the wild. It also announced a multimillion-dollar partnership focused on ocean health.

Former SeaWorld trainer Mark Simmons praised the moves, saying the new environments will provide the whales with mental stimulation that will help keep them healthy. He said the content of the whales' environment is even more important than the size, and that SeaWorld's trainers do a good job

of interacting with the whales. He said and the new features of Blue World Project will give them new tools that will let them improve.

"I think it's an enhancement, an obvious evolution of SeaWorld's mission," Simmons said in a phone interview. Simmons worked at SeaWorld Orlando from 1986 to 1996.

"Blackfish" director Gabriela Cowperthwaite said the changes won't please the public or improve the lives of its whales. She said that in captivity the whales are forcibly bred, separated from their families and fight constantly for dominance. She added that the larger tanks may not mean the whales will have more room, as SeaWorld plans to expand to other countries and could use the additional space to breed the whales more often.

"None of this would change in a bigger pool," she said. "What people are upset about is that whales are not suitable to captivity."

Cowperthwaite said SeaWorld should instead create oceanic sanctuaries that will let the whales live out their lives in more natural environments.

Dr. Douglas DeMaster said it's difficult to assess how the whales do in captivity.

"We don't really have standards that can be measured to assess animal welfare for captive marine mammals," he said in an email.

DeMaster is the research and science director for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Alaska region fisheries.

On Wednesday SeaWorld reported net income and revenue that fell short of Wall Street expectations and the company withdrew its financial outlook for the year. Its revenue in the second quarter was about \$40 million less than analysts had expected, and the company said "Blackfish" hurt attendance.

"Blackfish" explores the death of veteran SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau, who was pulled off a platform and killed by a whale named Tilikum in 2010. The film argues that the whales become more aggressive toward humans and each other

when they are kept in captivity.

Several entertainers, including country singers Trisha Yearwood and Willie Nelson and rock band Barenaked Ladies, have pulled out of planned performances at SeaWorld parks since the film's release. In July, Southwest Airlines and SeaWorld said they were ending a 25-year marketing partnership at the end of this year. SeaWorld said the decision was mutual, and said it wants to concentrate on growing markets in Latin America and Asia.

SeaWorld stock has fallen 37 percent in 2014 and finished at \$18 on Thursday. That is its lowest closing price since the company went public in April 2013. The shares gained 11 cents to \$18.11 in afternoon trading.

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