

# CAN CAPTIVE WHALES OR DOLPHINS BE RETURNED TO THE WILD?

Twenty years ago, this image from *Free Willy* inspired the world. But what's the reality behind captive releases?



**CATHY WILLIAMSON**  
heads WDC's work to end captive cruelty

In 1993, Warner Bros released *Free Willy*, the tale of a captive orca and his 12-year-old human friend. The popular film ended with Willy's dramatic return to the ocean, even if he did have to jump a sea wall to get there.

Meanwhile, Keiko, the real-life orca who starred in the film, was languishing in Reino Aventura, a run-down facility in Mexico, following his capture from the wild in Iceland.

After *Free Willy*, a powerful public campaign was established to return Keiko to the wild. Through the collaboration of environmental groups, the filmmakers and a private benefactor, Keiko was transferred to a huge sea pen in his native waters in Iceland in 1998. There, Keiko was returned to health, adapted to his new environment and taken out on 'ocean walks', where he was equipped with a satellite tag to track his movements as he followed a research boat. In July 2002, after some contact with wild orcas, Keiko began a five-week journey, alone, across the Atlantic, eventually arriving in Norway in good health. Although he never joined a wild orca pod, at his death in December 2003, Keiko was a free whale.

Few captive whales and dolphins have been returned to the wild after long-term captivity and Keiko may not have been the best candidate, given how little was known about where he came from and who his relatives were. In some cases, releases have been the result of dolphins escaping the nets of their coastal enclosures or a storm washing them out to sea. Other efforts have been more deliberate, often following the closure of facilities and weeks or months of dedicated rehabilitation, where individuals relearn important skills for surviving in the wild, such as eating live fish and avoiding boats. Captive bottlenose dolphins have been returned to the wild in Brazil, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Russia, the United States, and, most recently, Turkey. Three dolphins were released in the Turks and Caicos Islands following years of captivity in the UK. In most cases the individuals were seen for months or even years following release.

WDC recommends that the return of any whale or dolphin to the wild should follow strict guidelines. Any release should, where possible, help to conserve wild populations as well as

consider the health and long-term survival of the individual whales and dolphins returned to the wild. They should be released into, or close to, a population of whales and dolphins they would naturally be a part of, and into an area which is not heavily polluted. Local dolphin experts should be involved and the whale or dolphin carefully screened for any disease that might harm wild whales and dolphins. Those released should be healthy, able to feed themselves on live fish and free of behaviour that could jeopardise their long-term survival, such as approaching boats looking for food.



**IT'S POSSIBLE FOR CAPTIVE WHALES AND DOLPHINS TO LEARN HOW TO HUNT AGAIN AND SURVIVE IN THE WILD**

Whale and dolphin releases should be supported as far as possible by local people, through positive education campaigns. Monitoring of individuals is vital so we know whether the release has been successful.

As public sentiment grows against the keeping of highly intelligent, far-ranging creatures in captivity, more individuals are likely to become available for release through the closure of facilities no longer able to keep them. It's possible for whales and dolphins, even those who have lived a long time in captivity, to learn how to hunt again and survive in the wild. It may even be possible for those born in captivity to learn hunting skills from other whales and dolphins who have lived in the wild, if they are returned in a social group.

A multi-stage plan should be developed for each individual, with the aim of release, but with long-term care options should that not be possible. WDC, as part of the Free Morgan Foundation expert group, supports such a plan for Morgan, the wild orca found alone off the Dutch coast in 2010 and now held in very poor conditions at Loro Parque in Tenerife.

Other orcas, including Lolita and Corky, held in captivity in the United States, may be good candidates for release as researchers know their close family members are alive and thriving in the wild. The public supports their return to the wild or retirement in their natural waters but neither marine park holding them seems open to supporting such a project. Perhaps they fear that a successful release project would open the floodgates for all captive orcas.

It may not be possible to return all captive whales and dolphins to the wild. Following long spells in captivity, some may be too physically or mentally scarred to survive without human care. These individuals should be offered the chance to retire and live out the remainder of their lives in a safe enclosure in a natural cove or bay, where their health and welfare needs are taken care of, they can display more natural behaviour, they do not have to perform in shows, and public observation is only from a distance. WDC is working on an exciting project with Merlin Entertainments to establish just such a sanctuary for captive whales and dolphins, the first of its kind in the world. ■

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# FREE WILLY

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