

## Keiko

The orca whale that became known as Keiko was captured from a pod in Iceland in 1979. He was exhibited there for three years, then sold to Marineland in Ontario, Canada, where he performed for audiences. Although Keiko appeared to enjoy contact with humans, his dorsal fin began to droop and he developed skin lesions. In 1985, Keiko was sold to Reino Aventura, an amusement park in Mexico City. Warmer temperatures and chlorinated water aggravated Keiko's lesions and deteriorating health.

Then, in 1993, Warner Brothers released *Free Willy*, a film about a boy who frees an orca from an unscrupulous amusement park owner and returns him to the ocean. Keiko starred as the orca. The success of *Free Willy* and its sequels posed a moral dilemma: how could people cheer Willy's final leap to freedom knowing that the real orca was captive, living under less-than-adequate conditions?

Warner Brothers and Northwest entrepreneur Craig McCaw established the Free Willy Keiko Foundation in 1995. Donations large and small, some from schoolchildren, funded the building of a special facility for Keiko at the Oregon Coast Aquarium in Newport. With the help of the U.S. Air Force and the United Parcel Service, Keiko arrived at his new home on January 7, 1996.

In his new environment, Keiko gained weight and his general health improved. He also became a major attraction at the aquarium. But the goal was to release the whale into the wild. His stay in Oregon was meant to be temporary, lasting until his health improved enough for him to be released. Many marine biologists believed this goal was unrealistic, since Keiko had depended on humans for so many years. They doubted he could learn to survive on his own.

Nonetheless, on September 9, 1998, Keiko was flown to a sheltered bay in Iceland. Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ocean Futures Society took over his care and trained him to swim in the ocean outside the bay. Keiko disappeared on one of these excursions. He eventually turned up 870 miles away off the Norwegian coast. Again, he became an attraction, as boatloads of sightseers traveled to see him. Keiko accepted food from the visitors and even allowed some to climb on his back.

Keiko's handlers eventually herded him to Taknes Bay, hoping he might join a passing orca pod. Those hopes never materialized, and Keiko remained in Taknes Bay as his health deteriorated. On the morning of December 12, 2003, Keiko beached himself and died of pneumonia. The Oregon Coast Aquarium held a memorial service for him on February 20, 2004. Seven hundred people attended.

Even though Keiko lived in Oregon for a short time, Oregonians consider him to be one of their own. Although his story did not have the happy ending of *Free Willy*, it changed attitudes toward "animal attractions." Legislation now protects orca pods as endangered species. Only one orca has been taken captive in North American waters since 1976.

Written by [Eric A. Kimmel](#)

### Further Reading:

"Wildlife; Free Willy: The Denouement." *New York Times*, Sept. 6, 1998.

Muldoon, Katy. "The back story on Keiko and trainer Stephen Calussen, who died in a New Jersey plane crash." *Oregonian*, Dec. 14, 2003.

Preston, Julia. "Willy is Freed! Well, Moved, Anyway." *New York Times*, Jan. 8, 1996.

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