



Blackfish

Lesson Plan

Synopsis

Blackfish is a documentary that exposes what life is like for killer whales in captivity. It mainly focuses on Tilikum, a whale owned by SeaWorld Orlando, and his involvement in the death of Dawn Brancheau and two other people. The film also uncovers accidents caused by other killer whales in captivity, causing one to question why SeaWorld would jeopardize the safety of its trainers by putting them in the water with these unpredictable whales.

The documentary also discusses topics from SeaWorld's practices on breeding, especially on artificial insemination involving Tilikum, to SeaWorld's attempt to educate the public about wild killer whales based on SeaWorld's observation of its own collection of whales in captivity.

Blackfish is based on many emotional interviews that give an insight to many points of view about captivity.

Learning Objectives:

- Students can analyze information given from personal accounts of whales in captivity to form their own opinions.
- Students will compare and contrast behaviors and characteristics of killer whales in captivity to killer whales in the wild based on information gathered from the film.
- Students will respond to discussion points in the film both orally and in written format.
- Students will make inferences and draw conclusions about the effects of keeping killer whales in captivity.
- Students will make inferences and draw conclusions about the filmmaker's purpose by using supporting evidence found in the film.

- Students will be able to identify cause and effect relationships in the film.
- Students can make connections from the film to similar ideas, providing evidence to support those connections.
- Students will be able to sequence and summarize events in the film.
- Students can explain how film/media uses design techniques to influence the purpose of the film.
- Students can write responses to the film and provide evidence from the film to demonstrate understanding.
- After viewing the film, students can generate similar research topics on captivity, formulate open-ended questions, and generate a plan to gather needed information from a variety of resources.

Teacher Notes

This study guide has been divided up into sections to allow time for students to respond to the questions and discuss the film. Stopping points are coordinated with the DVD chapter selections. Before each new chapter, go over the questions that will be addressed so that students will be able to focus on the information needed for discussion points. Depending on how you decide to present the lesson, you may break the lesson up into several class periods.

Part 1- *Blackfish* Introduction/0:00-6:30

In this section we meet the trainers. Students will discuss some of the reasons they became trainers, and even reflect about whether or not they would like to become SW trainers themselves. Students will also discuss what requirements a SW trainer should have in order to be a successful trainer.

Questions

1. Discuss some of the reasons these people became trainers at SeaWorld.
2. Describe why you would or would not want to become a trainer at SeaWorld.
3. According to the film, what are the requirements to becoming a SeaWorld trainer? What other requirements do you think a trainer should have?

Part 2- Tilikum 6:31-14:54

In this section, OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) sues SeaWorld after the death of Dawn Brancheau. OSHA claims that putting trainers in the water is too dangerous because the whales are too unpredictable. OSHA argues that SeaWorld did not change any policies regarding trainer safety until after Dawn was killed by Tilikum. Despite the death of Dawn, SeaWorld wants to fight for the right to keep trainers in the water with the whales during the shows. In this section, the film also documents how the hunters were able to catch the first whales taken into captivity in the early 70's, and gives details about Tilikum's capture in 1983.

Questions

1. Do you agree with OSHA that it is too dangerous to keep trainers in the water or do you think SeaWorld should be able to continue putting trainers in the water? Explain your reasoning.
2. Describe how the hunters were able to capture the killer whales off the coast of Washington.
3. Describe how the older killer whales responded to having their young babies caught. What did the older whales do?
4. The whale hunter, John Crowe, describes the capture of the young killer whales being like kidnapping a baby away from its mother. Do you agree with that statement? Why or why not?

Part 3- Victoria B.C- 14:52 -22:26

In this section, the film documents young Tilikum at Sealand, and how it may have affected his behavior as becoming aggressive due the way he was treated by the older females. It is here at Sealand where Tilikum is believed to have claimed his first victim.

Questions

1. How did the other whales treat Tilikum?
2. Describe the housing "box" used to hold the whales at Sealand. What are your thoughts on its size, the number of whales it is suitable for, and the amount of time the whales spent there?

3. How did the trainers get the whales to go in the housing “box” at night? What behaviors often happened there?
4. Describe the incident that claimed Keltie Byrne’s life. Do you think it was an accident? Explain your reasoning. How do you think her death could have been prevented?

Part 4- Social Intelligence- 22:26-27:30

In this section, experts tell us some facts about killer whales in the wild. In a later section, we will learn some of the facts shared about killer whales at SeaWorld that contradict the facts about killer whales in the wild.

Questions

1. Name at least 5 facts about whales in the wild.

Part 5-A New Home 27:31-33:40

In this section, Tilikum goes to SeaWorld after being purchased from Sealand for breeding purposes. SeaWorld seemed to be very cautious about Tilikum’s previous behavior, but not willing to disclose important information with all the trainers who would be working with him.

Questions

1. How did the other whales, especially the females, treat Tilikum when he arrived at SeaWorld?
2. How did SeaWorld try and protect Tilikum from the other whales? What are your feelings on the solution SeaWorld provided? Do you think it is a fair one?
3. It is noted that SeaWorld did not disclose Tilikum’s involvement in Keltie Byrne’s death. Do you think the trainers at SeaWorld needed to know that information? Why or why not?
4. What do you think the reason would be for SeaWorld not to tell the trainers about Tilikum’s involvement in Keltie’s death.

Part 6-The Party Line 33:41-39:25

In this section, the film documents the births of two orcas in captivity and SeaWorld's decision to separate mothers and calves, despite the pods staying in family units for life in the wild.

Questions

1. Why did SeaWorld decide to separate Kalina from her mother, Katina?
2. Describe the way the mothers reacted to being separated from their calves. How does this make you feel?

Part 7-Why Would They Lie? 39:24-47:24

In this section, we learn some of the information SeaWorld employees give to their park visitors that seems to conflict with whales in the wild

Questions

1. What are some facts according to SeaWorld's employees that are told to the park's visitors especially related to life spans and collapsed dorsal fins?
2. According to the experts, why can it be a problem when different whales from different pods are placed together?
3. What is a major problem when aggression among whales occurs in captivity? How would whales in the wild deal with aggression from another whale?

Part 8-Accident History 47:24-54:46

In this section, we see some of the injuries to the trainers caused by the killer whales at SeaWorld in the past.

Questions

1. Many of the trainers at SeaWorld claim that when injuries to trainers occurred at other parks, they were not informed. Do you think that the trainers should know about these incidents? Why or why not?
2. What is an important reason for trainers working with a spotter?
3. What are your thoughts about Orkid pulling Tamaree into the water? Whose fault do you think it is?
4. Which accident made the biggest impression on you? Explain your thinking. How do you think these accidents could be prevented?
5. Why do you think these whales attacked their trainers?

Part 9-Public Relations 54:47-1:06

In this section, we learn why Tilikum is so valuable to SeaWorld, despite his dangerous reputation. Another whale claims the life of Alexis Martinez, causing many to keep questioning the safety of putting people in the water with captive killer whales.

Questions

1. What is SeaWorld's claim on how Daniel Dukes died?
2. What did the autopsy report reveal about Daniel's death?
3. Which version do you believe? Explain your thinking.
4. What is an advantage for SeaWorld being able to use artificial insemination to breed their whales?
5. What are some disadvantages to breeding a whale like Tilikum?
6. Loro Parque's tanks were not ready for the killer whales that arrived there from SeaWorld. Yet the owner decided to allow the whales to perform. What were some of the problems the whales had? What would you have done differently?
7. Alexis Martinez and the other Loro Parque trainers had never worked with killer whales before so they were trained by SeaWorld's trainers to prepare for their shows. Alexis was killed by one of the whales at Loro Parque. Do you think this could have been prevented? Why or why not?

Part 10-Shamu's True Potential 1:06:00-1:14:01

In this section, the events leading up to Dawn's death are revealed, and some of the trainers discuss their theories on why Tilikum might have killed her. SeaWorld also weighs in on its reasons for her death as well.

Questions

1. According to the trainers' accounts of what happened during the Dine With Shamu Show, what are some of the reasons Tilikum might have become frustrated with Dawn?
2. According to the trainers, how did Dawn end up in the water with Tilikum?
3. According to SeaWorld, how did Dawn end up in the water with Tilikum?
4. Which theory do you believe and why?

Part 11-Reality of Captivity 1:14:01-1:20:23

In the final section of the film, OSHA rules on its case against SeaWorld. OSHA declares that it is unsafe for trainers to be in the water during shows. We also get to see the reactions of former trainers as they view killer whales in the wild.

Questions

1. OSHA declares that it is too dangerous to put trainers in the water during the shows at SeaWorld. SeaWorld appeals this decision, meaning that they want to fight it and get trainers back into the water. Do you agree with OSHA or SeaWorld? Explain your thinking.
2. SeaWorld is aware of the dangers of having trainers in the water from the many accidents and several deaths caused by the killer whales. What do you think the reason is for SeaWorld wanting to continue to place trainers in the water knowing the danger?
3. Why do you think the whales strike out at their trainers?
4. What do you think are possible solutions to SeaWorld's problems?
5. Tilikum often spends many hours in isolation at SeaWorld. Why do you think he needs to be isolated? How does seeing him in isolation make you feel?

6. In the last part of the film, the former trainers get to see whales in the wild. What do you think some of their thoughts are that are going through their minds? How does it make you feel seeing the whales in captivity, and then seeing the whales in the wild?

Post-Film Discussion

Teachers may choose to address these questions in a whole class discussion, or in small groups. These may also be essay-type questions.

After seeing *Blackfish*, will you ever visit SeaWorld, or go there again? Explain your thinking.

Could you make SeaWorld a better place for killer whales in captivity? How?

What are some problems with keeping killer whales in captivity? What are some solutions to the problems you saw in the film?

Are there any benefits to keeping killer whales in captivity?

Follow Up Activities

Language Arts Activities

Have students reflect upon the film by writing a response about the biggest impression the film left upon them. Have them explain their reasoning.

Have students write a letter to SeaWorld about whether or not captivity should continue. Each student has the right to defend his or her point of view about the topic. This letter can contain personal experiences and include points made in the film.

Have students make posters that inform others about captivity. This should make an attempt to persuade others to support a point of view the student has. Have students research the effect of captivity on other animals. Have them compare and contrast the captivity of whales and the other animal being researched.

Create a pamphlet to inform people about killer whales in captivity. Organize your information and include all of the following information about whales in captivity such as: Who is responsible? Where are these whales? What is happening to the whales? Why are they in captivity? How do the whales get there?

Read some of the articles SeaWorld published after the release of *Blackfish*. Write a response to them based on what you saw in the film. Is there any information that SeaWorld presents that you feel still conflicts with what *Blackfish* presented? (The teacher may choose to present this information to the class, and allow students to respond independently.)

Create a t-chart of problems and solutions. On one side, create a list of problems you saw in the film. Next to the problem on the other side of the chart, create a possible solution. For example:

Problem	Solution
Since Loro Parque's tanks were not ready, the whales ate the tanks and got sick.	SeaWorld should have taken the whale's health into account by not sending the whales to Loro Parque until the tanks were inspected and ready.
When Tilikum was introduced at SeaWorld many of the female whales attacked him.	Maybe Tilikum should have been introduced to a smaller male that would not assert dominance.
In the film, another whale landed on a trainer while he was riding another whale during a show.	Make sure the whale who landed on the trainer was not in any more shows.

Math/Science Activities

Have students research the size of the tanks at a marine park such as SeaWorld or Miami Seaquarium. Have students create and construct a scale model of the tanks and the whales swimming in them. Keep in mind that some parks have more whales than others. Have students reflect on the size of the tanks. Then have them reflect on what it would be like if all the whales were allowed to swim in them at one time.

Teacher's Note: This may be an unlikely event to see all the whales in the same pool at the same time. Certain whales may have the tendency to be aggressive towards certain whales, and dominance issues among whales can determine which whales can coexist together.

Per Jeffrey Ventre- "There are definitely "cliques" or subgroups that are more compatible. Separations are based on who gets along. Katina for example may have more than one offspring in Orlando, and so her and her offspring and other compatibles may all be allowed to be in a pool configuration together. "

Investigate a killer whale echolocation ability by playing this game. Choose a person to be a whale. Blindfold that person and then have other students "swim" around the whale while clapping their hands. The whale should be able to follow the "fish" based on the sounds.

Investigate some tank sizes. Find an large open space, such as a soccer or football field and measure out the space. What are your thoughts about keeping a whale in such a small space?

Social Studies

Create a public service announcement about the whales in captivity. The goal should be to persuade others to stay away from SeaWorld, so make it informative, rather than a personal attack on SeaWorld. For example, what does SeaWorld do that does not make it an appropriate habitat for whales? Record it to show your peers if you can.

Divide the class into teams of 3 or 4 and have a debate over killer whale captivity. Both sides must be presented. Even if you do or don't agree with captivity, this is a great way to examine another person's point of view. Back up your argument with as many facts as you can.

Be a reporter and interview one of the trainers that was injured during the film, such as Tamaree or Ken Peters. If you are the reporter, what questions would you ask? How would you respond if you are one of the trainers? You may also interview eyewitnesses to these attacks.



Be a reporter that is on location during the whale hunts. Describe the capture as it is happening and interview the whale “cowboys.”

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