

Exhibit Review

Orcas: Our Shared Future

Sharing Futures

Darcie DeAngelo
University of Alberta

Entering the Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton (Canada), the exhibition *Orcas: Our Shared Future* (curated through the Royal British Columbia Museum) uses the silhouette of an orca whale's tail as an archway entrance to the multi-room exhibition. This archway immediately frames and invites visitors into a multisensory exhibition that intermingles multiple interpretations of these creatures.

Throughout the exhibition, one is immersed in the sounds of water, orca recordings, and lights that mimic watery reflections. In the first room, a visitor encounters the brilliant two-meter-long wooden sculpture, *Feast Dish* (1960), by the Kwakwaka'wakw artist Nakapenkem (Chief Mungo Martin) (1881–1962). The whale, carved from cedar wood and painted, as the caption tells us, is a “crest of the host” symbolizing the chief's wealth and oceanic riches. Throughout the exhibition, visitors see orca whales informed by a balance between scientific and Indigenous renderings, and, in what seems like a deliberate move, sometimes conflating them. The second room brings you to a multiscreen film of water. In this space, sculptures of orcas are in suspended animation above, each named as an individual with its own personality. From J Pod, a group of orcas that researchers have been observing for decades in the Salish Sea off the coast of British Columbia, Canada (they also travel to the waters around the San Juan Islands, USA), visitors get to “Meet the Matriarch,” known as Granny, an infamous leader of J Pod for over a century, whom scientists regarded as “the knowledge keeper” of her pod. After she died in 2019, Slick the Orca took over the leadership of the pod. Another caption introduces you to Scarlet the Orca, and so on, as each family member of J Pod has an individual role and personality. The next few rooms further present orcas as people, from Indigenous people

who claim them as ancestors, scientists and trainers who advocate for orcas to be legal persons, and a model of an orca brain that demonstrates, alongside a model of a human brain, how much bigger and just as complicated its cerebral lobes are as those of humans.

The exhibit successfully convinces you that orcas and humans are also entangled in the environmental disasters that humans have wreaked—the poisons in the ocean, the plastics that choke its watery residents. Humans will also suffer, and the orcas show us just how devastating our havoc is on their homes. This is one marked difference, though, between orcas and humans, as presented by the exhibit: the accountability of humans, at least when it comes to our shared futures. The exhibit's glass enclosures of fishing buoys and trash surround a map of the world's oceans with an interactive game to “Keep the ocean healthy!” by showing on a tabletop animation how different pollutants, which shift and must be matched by players with game pieces, alter the “health graph” of the ocean and its surrounding environments. While I was in the exhibition space on a Sunday afternoon, children visiting also turned it into a raucous game, with their shouts of “I need a plastic bottle!” peeling across the room. The message is clear: humans have not done their part to keep the ocean or our kin, the orcas, healthy.

While the shared looming disasters hold humans accountable, the exhibition stops short of delivering a full-on ethical condemnation of humans (and visitors). Allowing visitors to equate whales and humans flattens the unique qualities, vulnerabilities, and responsibilities of both species. Partly, this comes from the necessity of emphasizing that the kinship between humans and orcas hinges on human responsibility. And this is why some of the exhibit's displays are a bit troubling—it does not quite hold humans accountable for the violence they have committed against orcas, especially those captured for shows at aquariums. One wall of text captioned as “Captive and Captivating” explains to visitors that an “age of aquariums had begun” in the 1960s with the first capture of an orca off the coast of British Columbia. The paragraph concludes that captured and performing orcas “became lovable entertainers.” The love humans have for orcas is clearly represented here, but the suffering orcas endure in captivity is missing from this part of the exhibition (Coleman 2022; Lott 2017; Marino 2018). Here, flattening their mutuality as equal species is problematic, as humans have caused pain to orcas. Orcas are abducted as young babies from their mothers when captured for such performances, before they

can learn their dialects. This counters the previous exhibition room, which clearly tells us that orcas' dialects and personalities vary by family and are an extremely crucial part of their personhood. Orcas in captivity tend to have chronic illnesses, and performing orcas rarely get the space they need for proper exercise. Even the caption about "Free Willy," the whale star of the popular 1990s children's movie, does not quite reveal that the scientists who attempted to rewild him ultimately failed because his whale social skills were likely so inept from his years in captivity, away from family. The exhibit excludes these details from the room of the captured, instead explaining how these captives were "whales who changed the world." The changes included challenging the human stigma around "killer whales" and raising awareness of the importance of oceanic ecosystems. A visitor gets the sense that capturing the whales benefitted the whales on a larger ethical scale, outweighing their individualized suffering.

This ethical gap stems from the exhibition's thesis, which seeks to emphasize the kinship between humans and nonhumans. A relationality between humans and orcas entails an understanding of them, but, as others and I have written about perpetrators and victims after war, there is also a sidelining of individualized justice and accountability that inevitably occurs when emphasizing kinship after violence (DeAngelo 2025; Murphy and Hampton 2009; Nelson 2009; Njeri 2020). When we see orcas as kin or other kinds of persons in a universalizing exhibition, we avoid holding humans accountable for the kidnapping and forced labour of our oceanic kin.

That said, the exhibit invites visitors to pledge allegiance to the orcas, including an interactive screen where visitors can take a stand against ocean pollution. In its most successful interpretation, an exhibit like *Orcas* urges us to let go of anthropomorphizing whales in favour of what environmental historians have called "geomorphizing" (Bjornerud 2008). We have coevolved on the same planet, making humans and orcas vulnerable to the same risks of its looming disasters. Perhaps, in geomorphizing orcas, we can geomorphize ourselves.

Darcie DeAngelo

University of Alberta

deangelo@ualberta.ca

References

- Bjornerud, Marcia. 2008. *Reading the Rocks: The Autobiography of the Earth*. NYC: Basic Books.
- Coleman, Madison. 2021. "Mistreatment of Wild Animals in Captivity," *Ballard Brief 2* (II).
- DeAngelo, D. 2025. "Farmers, Soldiers, and Ghostheads: Laboring in the Minefields of Cambodia." *Critical Military Studies*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2025.2580069>
- Lott, R., and C. Williamson. 2017. "Cetaceans in Captivity." In *Marine Mammal Welfare*, edited by Andy Butterworth, 161-181. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-46994-2_II
- Marino, L. 2018. "The Marine Mammal Captivity Issue: Time for a Paradigm Shift." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Practical Animal Ethics*, edited by Andrew and Clare Linzey, 207-231. London: Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Murphy, Jeffrie G., and Jean Hampton. 1990. *Forgiveness and Mercy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Nelson, Diane M. 2009. *Reckoning: The Ends of War in Guatemala*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Njeri, Sarah. 2020. "The Politics of Non-recognition: Re-evaluating the Apolitical Presentation of the UN Humanitarian Mine Action Programs in Somaliland." In *Global Activism and Humanitarian Disarmament*, edited by Matthew Breay Bolton, Sarah Njeri and Taylor Benjamin-Britton, 169–195. Palgrave Macmillan, ChamExhibit Review