

Marineland animals suffering, former staffers say

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NIAGARA FALLS, ONT.—Larry lies behind bars in a pen, his eyes red and swollen. The harbour seal with “an amazing little personality” who arrived at Marineland about eight years ago is now a shadow of his former self. After repeated exposure to unhealthy water, he has gone blind.

Larry isn't the only sea mammal living in distress at Marineland, the sprawling attraction in Niagara Falls. In extensive interviews with the Star, eight former Marineland staffers describe a pattern of neglect that has repeatedly resulted in animal suffering.

More Inside Marineland: [Heartache for Smooshi the walrus as top trainer quits](#)

What the public doesn't see is the deterioration of marine mammals that become sick, suffer fur loss, skin damage and even blindness because of recurring water problems, they say.

They also point to chronic staffing shortages that leave trainers unable to provide a minimum standard of care for animals to do well in captivity.

John Holer, owner of the Niagara institution for 51 years, denies there are problems with water quality at the park and that unhealthy water has harmed marine mammals. He says there is more than sufficient staff to look after the animals. “All our facilities are legal,” he said.

More Inside Marineland: [Log details reveal water quality issues](#)

There are no government regulations for sea mammal captivity in Canada. The Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums, a self-regulating industry association, first licensed Marineland in 2007 and national director Bill Peters says there have been no complaints. Its licence was renewed for five years at the end of September 2011, after a summer inspection by a CAZA team of experts.

Photos: [Meet the animals of Marineland](#)

Among several troubling incidents at the park between last fall and this spring:

Sea lions Baker and Sandy had to be pulled repeatedly from the water and confined in dry cages, in one case for more than two months, to limit further harm to their already damaged eyes. Videos shot in 2011 and 2012 shows them writhing in pain or plunging their heads into a single bucket of clean water. Sandy often sits like a statue, dry as a bone. There's no lens in Baker's left eye. When a trainer put him back in the water in April, he barked and it flew out.

On May 28, baby beluga Skoot died after a two-hour assault by two adult male belugas in an incident former trainers say points to understaffing at the park. The evening attack unfolded in front of a guide untrained and helpless to intervene. The males bit Skoot's head and body, spun her around by the tail and bashed her into a rock wall where she stuck. After two trainers finally arrived to pull Skoot out of the pool, she convulsed and died in their arms.

Holer says Skoot was attacked because she had contracted bacterial meningitis, explaining: “If animals see another animal is going to die, they kill it.”

Five female dolphins — Sonar, Lida, Marina, Echo and Tsu — swam almost continuously in bad water in a concrete pool in a facility called the barn. Former employees say they lay at the bottom in murky green water or breeched and thrashed wildly, their reactions changing with the chemicals. Their skin fell off in chunks, their colour darkened and they refused to eat. This lasted intermittently for eight months, from October 2011 until just before show season began in May 2012 when their water was changed.

More Inside Marineland: [The death of baby beluga Skoot](#)

• Friday: [Solutions: Experts weigh in on how to improve conditions for animals living in captivity](#)

There are other problems at the facility. Walruses, which crave attention in captivity, are confined sporadically in cramped, waterless pens. Since November 2011, the park has kept a lone orca (killer whale), a practice banned in the United States because the complex, highly social mammals require the

company of their own species. Six of the park's seven seals are blind, have impaired vision or have had serious eye problems because of exposure to unhealthy water, former trainers say.

One trainer recalls how animals often squinted at trainers and struggled to perform after chlorine spikes in the stadium pool.

Poor conditions drove some of the eight former employees to leave and were a major factor in the departure of others.

Former employee Phil Demers resigned this past spring after 12 years as a senior trainer, worn down and frustrated by his inability to help the animals in his care.

"I realized I was no longer part of the solution. I was part of the problem," he said. "I can't train animals that are sick and compromised."

"For me it was a dream job," said former trainer Angela Bentivegna, who left the park in 2008 after four years. "Over the years, I started to see the reality and it wasn't as magical as I thought."

The Star obtained photos, videos and documents that support the accounts of the former employees.

Three made the difficult decision to speak out publicly, despite having signed non-disclosure agreements. Five asked that their names not be used for fear of legal consequences.

Adult visitors to Marineland pay \$48.53 a ticket; children 5-10 pay \$35.95 at the privately owned facility.

During two telephone interviews, Holer insisted that his operation has never had a problem with water.

He denied animals suffer or that there are too few trainers. "We take care of the animals — better than I would take care of myself," he said.

He said there are no skin problems and no sea mammal is kept out of the water in "dry dock." He repeated, including in reference to Skoot's death: "You have to understand . . . for people and all living things, there is a time to live and a time to die."

Holer said he's responsible for the water. He explained that test results three, even four times a day, plus outside lab readings, allow him to determine "how healthy the water is" and make adjustments. Holer acknowledged some animals have eye problems but says they are treated with ointment. He blames these problems on aging. Former employees say Holer willingly pays for medication once animals are sick.

The principles of water chemistry at the facility are the same as in any pool, albeit on a larger scale. Marineland has a system of sand filters and uses a combination of adding chlorine plus external ozone filtration to try to stop the growth of bacteria and algae and keep water chemically balanced, clean and healthy.

Record books from one former supervisor log a history of problems with the various pools from March 2011 to March 2012. He described the water as stagnant and flat in the barn, stadium and Aquarium pools. Although water periodically improved, he and Holer were never able to find a permanent solution to the problems. The effect on the animals, he said, was devastating.

"It got so that I didn't even have to test the water when I arrived in the morning. I could tell just by looking at how sick the animals were," the former supervisor said.

"If you don't look at them, there's no problem. What hurt me most is those animals in those pools. They can't go anywhere. They can't get out. They're stuck."

He didn't encounter water problems at Friendship and Arctic Coves, two other pools at Marineland.

The worst water was at the Aquarium, a dank, foul-smelling place with an underwater viewing area for sea lions and seals, and the barn and connecting stadium pools, according to the supervisor and former trainers. Off limits to the public, the barn is a converted factory made of concrete with pens and small pools for walrus, sea lions and seals and a dolphin pool. A small skylight provides the only natural light and photos show rusting on pools with crumbling, grime-encased sides. Dolphins that depend most critically on sonar live in a concrete world.

It was in the Aquarium facility that sea lions Baker and Sandy, both 20, were kept out of the water for weeks at a time last winter and spring with their eyes screwed tightly shut. The sea lions have been trained to open their eyes so staff can apply ointment. (Sandy died in mid-July.)

Larry, about 10 years old, was pulled from the water for days or weeks at a time and kept in either a waterless pen or a metal box on wheels.

Aging animals may suffer from cataracts, trainers said. But their eyes “are not red, swollen, bulbous and inflamed from age. That is from water quality,” one trainer said.

Records show the barn and stadium pools deteriorated after an ozone generator breakdown on Sept. 4, 2011. The supervisor says the water turned green and serious water problems persisted intermittently over the coming months.

All the animals in the pools suffered over the course of the winter and spring, Demers and the supervisor say.

After the first day of green water, “the animals were in hell,” including walruses, Demers said. Smooshi had a wildly inflamed flipper, which a veterinarian said was a “chemical burn,” and Sonja’s ulcerated eye worsened. “All the animals showed signs of damage. This was one of the worst states I’ve ever seen them in.”

The situation was particularly acute for the five dolphins, which, unlike sea lions, seals and walruses, are unable to pull themselves from the water. The supervisor recalls many times when the dolphins were so dark and the water so green, they were barely visible. Photos show dolphins with eyes squeezed shut. Former trainers say ozone leaks and subsequent exposure are problems that date back years at the park. Exposure to ozone can lead to respiratory problems and even death. Employees recall having to work in masks around the pools and wear tags that were supposed to turn white when ozone levels rose. Problems with the ozone filtration system also mean that water in which animals swim is being less adequately purified.

“I didn’t want to leave the animals,” said Megan Cook, a trainer for six years until 2006, when she had to quit because her doctor couldn’t clear up the rash that covered her body. “I had to stay out of the water. I had no choice.”

In a 2010 memo, Demers blamed poor water quality for ill health among walruses, as well as sea lions and seals. “Health issues arise in every instance, ranging from eye damage, fur loss, weight loss, stress, skin lesions (and more).”

Larry and harbour seal Baby were kept in freshwater at London’s Storybook Gardens before arriving at Marineland with healthy eyes. Demers lobbied unsuccessfully in 2010 to have the park’s six harbour seals kept in a freshwater pool instead of saltwater — suggesting the carp pond with a protective fence — to limit further damage and ease inflammation and pain.

In his May 4, 2012, exit interview, Demers confronted Holer about problems with the water. “The health of the animals is terrible,” he tells his boss in the recorded conversation. “The water is destroying these animals, it really is.”

“We don’t know what caused that problem,” Holer replied.

A few days after Demers left, Holer dumped water from the barn and stadium pools and brought in more from Friendship Cove. The May 10 opening was delayed five days to do it. Water was not changed at the Aquarium.

Former employees say that a shortage of trainers means the animals don’t get the attention they need to do well in captivity.

Walruses in captivity crave human attention and yet former trainer Bentivegna says they were left days at a time in their dark barn pens with no stimulation apart from feeding. Demers says nothing has changed. Walrus vomiting and weight loss is a recurring problem at Marineland.

“My observations in short were that many of the behaviour issues the animals went through (re walruses regurgitating, etc.) may have been avoided by mental stimulation and training,” Bentivegna

wrote in a recent email to the Star. “The marine mammal department was constantly understaffed (as well as lack of experienced staff) so it was impossible to provide all the time and attention to the animals that was necessary for their well being.”

Bentivegna says the final straw was seeing Zeus, a powerhouse walrus who knew his own strength, disintegrate into the shell of a once intimidating creature. Recent videos and photos show him sitting behind bars in a waterless space barely big enough to turn around in and looking broken-down and miserable. He was being treated for regurgitation issues — exacerbated by bad water — and the lack of trainers meant he often lay unattended in his own excrement.

Marketing manager Ann Marie Rondinelli said in an email there are from 20 to 25 full-time trainers. Sources told the Star there are 16, with one on maternity leave.

Former trainers cite short-staffing in the death of baby beluga Skoot. None was on hand when a two-hour assault on the calf by two adult male belugas began on May 28, and none arrived for two hours, despite radio calls from an inexperienced guide who was powerless to intervene.

“There is no excuse for the short-staffing,” one of the former trainers told the Star.

In 2011, SeaWorld Parks won a custody battle with Marineland for the return of its breeding male orca, Ikaika, loaned from Orlando. The case was ultimately decided by leasing legalities, but SeaWorld officials cited concerns about staffing numbers and training and said Holer refused to allow trainers to attend seminars where they could update their skills. But Lanny Cornell, a California-based sea mammal veterinarian on monthly retainer to Marineland, says in a March 2011 affidavit that trainers were experienced, adding he believed there were “approximately 18 full-time trainers on-site.”

Marineland had five orcas in 2004, but four have since died; orca Kiska has been alone since November 2011. It’s a practice banned in the U.S. and frowned on by CAZA. Holer would not address questions about the possibility of a new home for Kiska.

Water appears better in the stadium and barn pools. Conditions have improved for the five dolphins, currently in the stadium pool for the season along with two belugas. The Aquarium, which is ringed by an electric fence, still reeks of excrement. Holer says “sea lions and seals poop on the stage.”

Baker is a big guy, the only male sea lion swimming mindless laps during our two recent visits to the Aquarium. He used to be the clown, the funny fellow with the clear eyes, still featured in “Attractions Niagara.”

Now his body is scarred and itchy with patches of missing fur. Every time he passes he rubs his head hard against the side, trying to scratch himself over and over. His eyes are squeezed so tightly shut it looks like he doesn’t have any. For all intents and purposes, he doesn’t.