

Killer Whales
Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly
Time&Again

My mobile phone buzzes and a cryptic message appears, thanks to Orca Annie and Odin Lonning's Vashon Hydrophone Project -- "orcas at dolphin pt headed south." I know to bundle up, grab my camera, and head to Point Robinson where I will be joined by dozens of other islanders anticipating a glimpse of Southern Resident Killer Whales passing the point as they head south in their search for salmon and seals. If we are lucky, perhaps we will all be privileged to watch a spectacular display of them breaching and spy hopping. It has not always been this way. In 1965 islanders watched as these magnificent creatures were chased, rounded up, captured, and some killed, in an attempt to sell them to Sea World for display and performances in their "aquariums."

In 1965 Namu was brought to the Seattle Public Aquarium (not to be confused with the current Seattle Aquarium) and put on display by promoter Ted Griffin after being accidentally captured in a fishing net in British Columbia. The success of Namu began the rush to capture and display Puget Sound Killer Whales. Don Goldsberry from Sea World, joined forces with Griffin and attempted to capture a female Orca for display at Sea World in San Diego. In October 1965 using helicopters, seal bombs (now illegal explosives fishermen used to scare away seals), and harpoons, they pursued a group of Orcas around Vashon, Commencement Bay, and The Narrows. At one point they attempted to herd the group into Quartermaster Harbor thinking that the enclosed harbor would make the capture easier. But, the Orcas avoided Quartermaster only to be surrounded a few days later in Carr Inlet south of The Narrows where Griffin and Goldsberry captured the adolescent Shamu who was 14 feet long and weighed 2,000 pounds. Her mother was harpooned and eventually killed during the capture and in December Shamu was shipped to San Diego where she performed for 6 years until she died. Namu had only survived 381 days in captivity.

Shamu was the first successful intentional live capture of an Orca (Namu and two others, Wanda and Moby Doll, had been accidentally captured), and began a series of captures and sales from 1965 to 1976 in which over 50 Southern Resident Killer Whales were either captured or killed during capture. These captures and killings decimated the Orca population in Puget Sound and the Orcas have never fully recovered, although in 2015 nine new births give some hope for the eventual survival of the population.



Point Robinson Whale Watching, Terry Donnelly Photograph, 2015



Shamu Capture in Carr Inlet, Seattle Times Photograph, 1965

Terry Donnelly's 2015 photograph captures the excitement of islanders, young and old, as they anticipate the arrival of the Orcas at Point Robinson. The 1965 Seattle Times photograph captures the very different attitude when Orcas were viewed as an exploitable economic resource. Nets laid out by the fishing boat Chinook surround three orcas, and Ted Griffin is poised to direct the capture of Shamu. Her mother, who had been harpooned with a float and locator beacon so they could track the pod is with her. Shamu's mother died from her injuries, and Shamu was shipped to San Diego. These two photographs are a good measure of how our attitudes have changed. In 1965 Orcas were just another resource to be exploited for profit. Today, we view Orcas as an endangered species protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (1972) and as an indicator species for the health of Puget Sound.

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Photo 1 – Whale Watching at Point Robinson - Terry Donnelly
Photo 2 – Shamu Capture in Carr Inlet 1965 – courtesy Seattle Times