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Nude man found dead on killer whale's back

□ No one knows how the Miami man died while in the tank with an animal that killed once before.

By Lenny Savino

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

The nude body of a man was found at SeaWorld Orlando on Tuesday lying across the back of an 11,000-pound killer whale that was moved to Florida after it was involved in the death of a trainer.

Police were still trying to contact relatives of the 27-year-old Miami victim, whose name was not disclosed.

One expert said the 22-foot whale named Tilikum, the largest killer whale in captivity, could have mistaken the man for a toy.

"Killer whales play," said Sam Gruber, a marine animal expert at the University of Miami. "They are often seen tossing prey around for no apparent reason other than play."

Investigators said the victim apparently hid in the park after it closed, took off his clothes, then climbed a fence outside the 6-foot-deep breeding tank and jumped into 55-degree water with Tilikum, whose name means "friend" in the Chinook language.

A park employee spotted the man's body draped over the back of Tilikum about 7:35 a.m. Tuesday in one of the whale pools behind Shamu Stadium, said Victor Abbey, SeaWorld's executive vice president and general manager. The man's swimming suit was found in the tank.

"It's been a pretty bizarre day," said Jim Solomons, a spokesman for the Orange County Sheriff's Office. "No one has come forward and said, 'John or Bill or Mike hasn't come home from SeaWorld.' It all just adds to the mystique."

Animal-rights groups, including the Humane Society of the United States, said the death shows why whales should not be

Killer whale facts

- **Scientific name:** *Orcinus orca*.
- **Length:** Males up to 31 feet; females up to 28 feet.
- **Weight:** Males up to 18,000 pounds; females up to 12,000 pounds.
- **Life span:** Sea World biologists think females live to their mid-30s, while males live a maximum of 29 to 30 years.
- **Distribution:** Found throughout the world, though sizable populations exist in the eastern Pacific Ocean and Atlantic.

Size comparison

6-foot man

Male killer whale



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SENTINEL FILE

Tilikum. SeaWorld animal rests at edge of pool in file photo.



GEORGE SPENCER/THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

Please see WHALE, A-10

No morning show. Employees direct visitors away from stadium. Shows resumed at 2 p.m.

Activists question security

WHALE from A-1

held in captivity.

"The fact that a SeaWorld patron was able to gain access to the whale pools after the park was closed demonstrates that SeaWorld does not provide enough security for whales and visitors alike," said Naomi Rose, a marine mammal scientist for the Humane Society of the United States.

"SeaWorld and all marine parks should have security officers posted around the whale pools while the park is closed to prevent this kind of tragedy," Rose said.

Russ Rector of Fort Lauderdale, president of the Dolphin Freedom Foundation, said, "This animal is demented. Keeping those animals in small concrete boxes and making them do stupid animal tricks makes them angry and dangerous."

Abbey said three security officers patrol the Shamu Stadium area overnight, although no one is specifically stationed at the tank that holds Tillikum, the attraction's only male orca of breeding age.

The park, which has no surveillance camera at the breeding tank, will review its security measures, Abbey said, adding that "In the 35-year history of SeaWorld, this has never happened before."

SeaWorld maintains that its displays educate millions of people and boost efforts at conservation.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which regulates wild animals in captivity, also will examine safety precautions at SeaWorld.

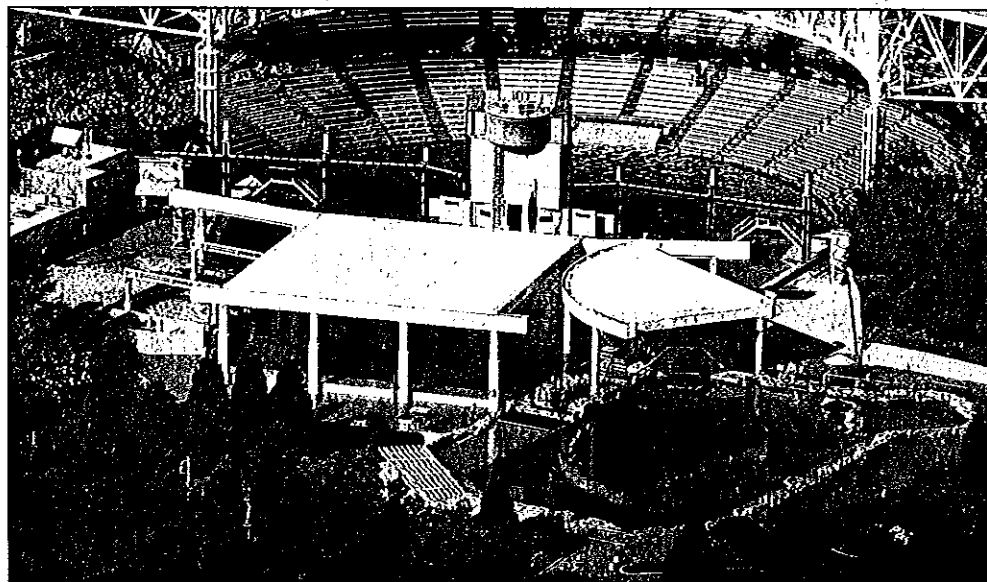
"If it appears there is any negligence on the part of SeaWorld causing or contributing to the situation by not having a reasonable barrier to exclude the uninvited public, we will investigate further," said Ron DeHaven, a Department of Agriculture spokesperson.

Tillikum was brought to Orlando to breed. And as long as the park is successful at captive breeding, it doesn't have to attempt controversial captures in the wild.

Federal officials had previously expressed concerns that Tillikum could kill again.

Tillikum, who has fathered four calves, is not trained to interact with humans but is sometimes used in shows to splash water on park guests, Abbey said.

In granting a permit to transfer Tillikum to the attraction, National Marine Fisheries Service officers said



RED HUBER/THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

Shamu Stadium. SeaWorld employees can be seen at rear of stadium, part of the killer-whale holding area.



GEORGE SKENE/THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

The details. General Manager Victor Abbey discusses accident reported by employee.

they were hesitant to do so because they didn't want to see the "tragic incident" in Canada repeated in Orlando.

Tillikum and two female whales drowned their trainer in front of spectators at Sealand of the Pacific in British Columbia in 1991. The park closed its whale habitat because of the accident that killed Keltie Byrne. Officials said Byrne accidentally slipped and fell into the water. The whales drowned her by not letting her surface for air.

No one knows why the Miami man jumped into the whale tank. A prelimi-

nary examination of the man's body found no bite marks or other wounds, and the cause of death appears to have been by drowning or hypothermia in the chilly water, investigators said.

Since the body was found on Tillikum's back, it's unlikely the whale was behaving aggressively, Rose said. The whale was probably playing with the man and continued to play with the body after the man died, she said.

Heidi Harley, a marine mammal psychologist at the University of South Florida, said killer whales have been

known to hold humans underwater.

"You could have a bored animal that wants to play, but generally an animal that's had experience with humans has a sense of their limitations," she said.

If the whale did hold the man underwater and drown him, Harley said that would probably be aggressive behavior.

She said she was surprised to learn that the body was found on the whale's back, speculating that the giant sea animal could have been trying to lift the man to safety.

"It sounds like he picked him up," she said. "That's not necessarily an aggressive thing. It's possible he picked him up if he was in trouble."

Brad Andrews, a biologist for SeaWorld, said he couldn't speculate on why the body was found on Tillikum's back, but he said he agreed that it was not an indicator of aggressive behavior.

The 14-year-old Tillikum was captured in the frigid waters off Iceland.

Tuesday morning's Shamu show was canceled while investigators removed the man's body at about 11:30. The Shamu show resumed at 2 p.m.

Customers at the park were not told about the fatal accident.

"I didn't hear about it," said Becky Larsen, a White Springs science teacher who was leaving the park after taking her infant son to feed dolphins. "I'm sorry he had to lose his life, but it's absolutely ludicrous."

Katherine Bouma and Susan Jacobson of the Sentinel staff contributed to this report. Wire services also were used.

Experts say people aren't on the menu

□ Killer whales are expert hunters, but people aren't their usual prey. They can be aggressive, however.

By Katherine Bouma

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

Killer whales don't attack humans in the wild, scientists say. But they will kill just about any animal in the ocean.

In fact, the huge black-and-white animals, also called orcas, originally were named "whale killers" because they kill other large marine mammals, even those more than twice their size.

Killer whales, like other wild animals, would not try to eat something new and different such as a human, said Heidi Harley, a marine mammal psychologist at the University of South Florida.

But she said a killer whale like SeaWorld's Tillikum, who has worked with people in the past, would have a sense of human limitations.

"When whales do behave aggressively, they can hold people underwater," Harley said. "They can corral you. They're pretty big animals."

Killer whales have a wide diet, including fish, squid, seals and sea lions. They live in all the world's oceans, and tens of thousands are known to exist worldwide. Male killer whales grow up to 27 feet long and weigh as much as 18,000 pounds.

Killer whales are successful predators because of their cooperative hunting, in which all the animals within the pod participate. Their black-and-white coloring helps them hide from prey. From the bottom, the orca is white, just as sunlight makes the water appear white to an animal looking up from below.

Killer whales can hold their breath for as long as 20 minutes, but they usually surface every four or five minutes. People, by contrast, can hold their breath only a minute or two.

Female orcas carry pregnancies for 17 months, and calves stay with their mothers for 10 years, sometimes for life. Killer whales travel in matriarchal, family-based pods.

Living with unrelated orcas is just one of the differences a killer whale in captivity would experience, said Naomi Rose, a biologist for the U.S. Humane Society who specializes in killer-whale behavior.

Mothers and calves in captivity often are separated after only a few years, Rose said. Whales also have less to occupy their time, since in the wild they would spend most of their energy searching for food.

"They're bored," Rose said. "When they're not being trained, what are they doing? They're looking at four walls."

Brad Andrews, a top biologist for SeaWorld, said he has no indications Tillikum was bored. "It's past any substantive, quantitative science," he said. "You have a good feeling that an animal is happy, healthy. One indication that he's happy is he's sired many, many calves."