

Keiko healthier after year in new Oregon home

■ **WHALE:** The orca swims with divers and views action films at the Oregon Coast Aquarium in Newport

The Associated Press

Just one year after Keiko arrived in Oregon, the beloved killer whale dives, turns and twirls with newfound energy through his chilly 2 million-gallon tank at the Oregon Coast Aquarium.

Severely underweight just 12 months ago, he has gained more than 1,000 pounds. He has shed a host of health problems, from a sensitive stomach to a patchy skin virus. His droopy dorsal fin stands straighter.

And, most importantly, he appears to be more confident, curious and mentally stimulated.

He gazes intently at visitors through underwater viewing windows, plays with his own shadow on the bottom of the pool and seems to enjoy action movies on a big-screen TV. His current favorite: "Independence Day."

As though he loves the company, Keiko hovers over scuba divers working in his tank. He cruises by for underwater rub-downs and frolics in the bubbles from their respirators. For a change, he teaches them new games.

Whale experts had expected the move from the Mexico City amusement park where Keiko lived to be good for him.

They figured the orca, an adolescent, would grow larger and more frisky with an improved en-

KEIKO: ONE YEAR AT HIS NEW HOME

Keiko arrived at the Oregon Coast Aquarium in Newport, Ore. on Jan. 7 1996. At that time, he had several health conditions that were of great concern. One year later, his health has improved, and he is showing signs of better health both physically and mentally.

DORSAL FIN:

His fin was drooping severely because of a lack of exercise. It is now beginning to show signs of becoming more erect.

MUSCLE TONE:

Muscle tone is more evident and defined. Veterinarians can no longer see rib and skeletal parts.

SKIN:

Rash like lesions located behind his front flippers are gone.

TEETH:

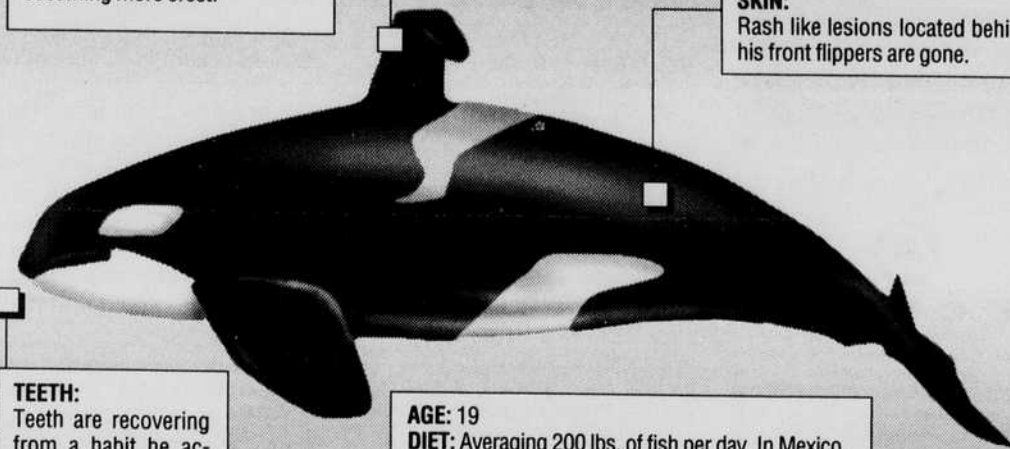
Teeth are recovering from a habit he acquired in Mexico of chewing on the aquarium walls. Trainers have gotten him to stop.

AGE: 19

DIET: Averaging 200 lbs. of fish per day. In Mexico, he was eating a mere 125 lbs of fish.

LENGTH: 21 feet

WEIGHT: In Mexico, Keiko was weighing in at 7,720 lbs. Aquarium officials estimate his weight to be around a healthier 8,700 lbs. currently.



MATT GARTON/Emerald

vironment and diet. But they couldn't predict the details.

Keiko still is far from being returned to the sea and needs medical care, and veterinarian Lanny Cornell says there still is medical progress to make.

Still, all agree, there's been a lot of improvement.

"We looked at our last year and said: 'Wow. What a great year!'" said marine mammal expert Nolan Harvey, who cares for Keiko.

It also was a great year for the Oregon Coast Aquarium, which counted 1.31 million guests in 1996, up from just 600,000 the year before.

Many of the visitors stayed in Newport-area hotels and motels: Room tax receipts increased on average 25 percent to 30 percent when compared with each of the previous three years.

"The community has been very pleased with the results — not only financially but, I guess, spiritually," said Phil Hutchinson, executive director of the Greater Newport Chamber of Commerce. "I think that Keiko has to take the majority of the credit for the increase."

Oregon has a bad case of orca love.

It started to build long before last Jan. 7 when a United Parcel Service C-130 cargo plane brought Keiko to Newport.

The whale's plight became widely known in late 1993, after the movie "Free Willy" made a

box-office splash. Keiko was a star.

Fans wanted to know: If a captive whale can be freed in the movies, why not in real life?

Before long, with the help of such big-money backers as filmmaker Warner Bros., the McCaw Foundation and Mattel Inc., the Free Willy-Keiko Foundation was formed to study the possibility.

Keiko had been cramped in a too-little, too-warm pool at Reino Aventura since 1985. His health was suffering.

Work to return Keiko at least to good health, if not his home waters, began. Children and adults from around the world donated money to build the \$7.3 million tank at the Oregon Coast Aquarium.

The fund raising continues and the foundation receives much of the aquarium's newfound revenue, which is used for Keiko's care and feeding.

Beverlee Hughes, the new president of the foundation, is upbeat about the unusual collaboration between the worlds of science and entertainment.

For Keiko, she said, 1996 was a year to return to good health. "The new year," she said Monday, "is going to be the year of science."

The foundation hopes to enlist the help of the prestigious Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Massachusetts to study Keiko.

They may try to identify his "language" and compare the sounds he makes with those of other whales from Icelandic waters. The efforts eventually would be directed at finding the pod from which he was captured.

"He is certainly a prime candidate for release," Hughes said.

In the meantime, Hughes will continue to search for another marine mammal that might be an appropriate companion for Keiko.

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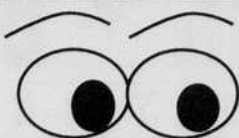
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