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Monday, Mar 15, 2004

News

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Posted on Sat, Feb. 22, 2003

'Free Willy' whale now semi-free

Lives near Norway

By ELISABETH NADIN
Herald Correspondent

Keiko, the "Free Willy" whale, is free -- in a manner of speaking.

Almost 100 people attended a sold-out lecture Wednesday evening at Long Marine Laboratory's Seymour Center in Santa Cruz to learn where Keiko is now, and how he got there.

Efforts to return Keiko to his native wild habitat in Atlantic waters off Iceland have met with triumphs and setbacks. Loosely supervised, Keiko lives just off the west coast of Norway.

Charles Vinick, director of the Keiko reintroduction project in Iceland, told Wednesday's audience about the ordeals involved in the first attempt to release a whale raised in captivity.

Clamor for Keiko's liberation came after the 1993 movie "Free Willy" galvanized children around the country. More than a million children, along with other private sponsors, pushed for Keiko's release by sending letters and money to the Ocean Futures Society.

Vinick, executive vice president of Ocean Futures, told the audience that Keiko was the worst captive marine mammal candidate for return to the wild. Keiko was 26 years old, the oldest whale in captivity -- though male orcas in the wild live till about 50 -- when he was returned to Iceland in 1998. At that time, he lived in a marine pen and gradually spent more and more time out in the ocean.

Nine years and \$20 million after plans for his release were first discussed, Keiko is now semi-wild. "Is Keiko in captivity, or is he free? He's somewhere in between," said Vinick.

In attempts to introduce Keiko to families of wild orcas, commonly called killer whales, scientists have been able to monitor pod behavior. They have counted wild whale populations and done some genetic studies. The DNA results have enabled scientists to identify distinct lineages within a single group of orcas. Before Keiko's reintroduction, not much was known about the family arrangements of wild whales.

Only time will tell if Keiko will eventually become independent of humans. Vinick hopes he will be lured away by his wild brethren.

But until then, as Vinick said, "He may be our ambassador in and out of whales. Sometimes living with whales, sometimes with people."

Keiko left his human guides, who followed him in boats in summer 2002 after three years in Iceland. Although he swam more than 1,000 miles away from Iceland, Keiko reappeared in Norway a month


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later and was spotted swimming with children and accepting fish from humans.

Iceland and Norway have since passed legislation banning human interaction with Keiko. But Vinick says it may be impossible to completely free the whale. "Keiko is an international celebrity," Vinick said.

The Keiko project has been costly and time-consuming, and its success is still tenuous. But Vinick said valuable knowledge of marine mammals has been gained from the project.

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