

"Bikers 4 Orcas to ride to free whales in captivity" - by Sara Bruestle (Mukilteo Beacon)

If you think about it, bikers and killer whales aren't all that different. Wild orcas swim more than 100 miles per day in social groups called "pods" - and bikers cover at least as much pavement on road trips in motorcycle "clubs." Most of all, they both love their freedom, whether it's in the ocean or on the road. Except there are 42 known orcas that aren't free. All over the world, on Saturday, June 14, motorcyclists will be riding for the whales that love their freedom just as much as the bikers do - including a ride that kicks off right here.

The Lady Riders of Western Washington, a local women's motorcycle club, has joined a Bikers 4 Orcas movement with the goal of returning captive whales back to the ocean. The Lady Riders are hosting a ride from Mukilteo to Anacortes to raise awareness and win freedom for orcas in captivity.

"Bikers all over the world care about orcas," said Libbie Kaushik, who organized the ride. "I just thought it was a good excuse for a ride and a good way to raise awareness."

Bikers 4 Orcas was founded in 2013 by Vincent Lensen in Holland, after he took his kids to see killer whales at a Dutch aquarium. A motorcyclist, Lensen felt sadness instead of excitement at seeing an orca in a tank - and realized it shouldn't be alone in a tank doing tricks, but out in the open ocean with its pod. As it turns out, 4,400 bikers worldwide - and counting - feel the same way.

"Orcas are sso cute, and they look happy all the time, so it's like 'Oh, they like doing tricks,'" said Dawn Clark, another Lady Rider who supports the cause. "But when you actually learn what they're like in the wild how their families stay together for life, and they swim over 100 miles per day out in the open then you realize a 20-foot tank is just not cutting it."

Today, Bikers 4 Orcas is focusing on freeing three wild-caught orcas: Lolita, Morgan and Kshamenk. Lolita is the oldest orca in captivity. She has spent more than 40 years alone in a tank so small it's illegal at the Miami Seaquarium. The tank has no shade, so she has to wear sunscreen. A sickly Morgan was first placed in the Dolfinarium in Holland with the promise to release her back into the wild once nursed back to health. Instead, she was eventually sent to Loro Parque, a theme park in Spain.

Kshamenk is held captive in Mundo Marino, an Argentinian waterpark. He is so depressed that he recently attacked his trainer and the two dolphins he swims with.

"The ones who were caught those are the heartbreaking ones, because they have known

the freedom," Kaushik said. "They're like, 'What the heck?' It's just like being in jail." Clark said Bikers 4 Orcas also wants to see all captive-bred orcas retired and send to enclosed sea sanctuaries.

On June 14, the Lady Riders invite bikers to take a ferry with them from Mukilteo to Whidbey Island to visit the newly opened Langley Whale Center. After a tour, the 62-mile trip will continue to Deception Pass and the Rosario Beach. The Anacortes beach features panoramic views of the San Juan Islands, where Lolita once swam. At each stop, bikers will pass out fliers on orcas in captivity. Fittingly, Kaushik and Clark said they'll be riding matching black and white Yamaha FZ6R sport bikes, which they said look like orcas on the road.

This isn't the Lady Riders' first attempt at raising awareness about captive orcas. Clark has hosted three documentary screenings at local theatres about whales in waterparks, including "Blackfish" and "Lolita: Slave to Entertainment." Clark and her daughter have also participated in Empty the Tanks protests, including one out front of SeaWorld in San Diego.

"We want to tell more people because the more people who know, the more people won't go to SeaWorld," she said. Kaushik and Clark said they hope to see up to 50 bikers join them on the ride around Whidbey Island. "Whales don't belong in captivity, that's my message," Kaushik said. "Everything [waterparks] do is about money. Selling little stuffed animals, it's all supporting the bottom line. "This whole antiquated thing of circus and zoo isn't working anymore. People are realizing it's not cool."

Want to join the club? Meet at the Harbour Pointe Chevron gas station, at 12701 Mukilteo Speedway. Kickstands up at 10 a.m. Bring a brown bag lunch. More information can be found on the Lady Riders of Western Washington Facebook or Meetup pages.