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Animal Celebrities—Then and Now: Exploring Oceanic Imaginaries Through Celebrity Marine Mammals

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Abstract

This study examines portrayals of marine mammal celebrities (MMCs) in popular culture over the past 70 years, reflecting evolving public attitudes toward ocean conservation. It identifies four main types of MMCs, each linked to a specific era and shaped by changes in media landscapes, perceptions of marine mammal agency and welfare, and conservation priorities: (1) Hollywood MMCs (ca. 1960–1990s)—wild animals captured and exhibited in aquaria, cast as celebrities based on their roles in traditional mass media (blockbuster movies); (2) MMCs in human care (ca. 1990s–2010s)—animals housed in aquaria whose fame stemmed from public concern about their welfare and calls for their release; (3) rescued MMCs (ca. 1980s–present)—marine mammals cared for by humans after they were injured in the ocean; and (4) endangered and dangerous MMCs (2010s–present)—wild animals that approach humans, demonstrate human-like behaviours, or interact with boats. Introducing the method of "following the animal," the article provides examples of celebrity animals that illustrate each of the four categories, such as the dolphin Flipper and the walrus Freya. The study contributes to the thematic issue on Ocean Pop: Marine Imaginaries in the Age of Global Polycrisis by highlighting the mutual influence of media, animal celebrity, and conservation, and urges further research into how shifting representations shape global engagement with marine life and the environment.

Keywords

anthropomorphism; charismatic megafauna; conservation; ecosystem sentinels; environmental policy; imaginaries; marine mammals; ocean pop; polycrisis

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1. Introduction

Environmental and conservation scholars and advocates have long held conflicting opinions concerning the use of animal mascots and "real" animals in environmental conservation, favouring the attention and benevolence it yields towards animals and ecosystems, while remaining wary of its potential to foster misrepresentations of the "real" animals and their lived reality (see, for example, Gouabault et al., 2011; Jepson & Barua, 2015; Leader-Williams & Dublin, 2000; Moore, 2023). These discussions are further complicated when relating them to celebrity animals, whose popular imaginary exists only in the context of what this article labels anthropomorphic empathy, referring to the emotional bond humans forge with (celebrity) animals whose appearance or behaviours they perceive as mimicking human features or habits.

This article explores the intersection of animal celebrity and care for the environment in the context of the oceanic environment, which is home to a myriad of fascinating animals while also facing severe environmental issues, including biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, and other impacts of the climate crisis. The article identifies animal celebrities that have come to define oceanic imaginaries over the past approximately seven decades, with a particular focus on marine mammal celebrities (MMCs).

In doing so, the article establishes four categories of MMCs, each corresponding to an approximate time period: (1) Hollywood MMCs (ca. 1960–1990s)—animals that were captured by humans in the open ocean and brought to aquaria, who were then cast as celebrities based on their roles in traditional mass entertainment; 2) marine mammals in human care (ca. 1990s–2010s)—animals in aquaria whose celebrity revolved around public outcries concerning their treatment in captivity and demands to release them back into the open ocean; (3) rescued marine mammals (ca. 1980s–present)—animals whom humans cared for after the marine mammals were injured in the open ocean; and (4) endangered and dangerous marine mammals (ca. 2010s–present)—animals in the open ocean who appear to seek out human company, display human-like behaviors, or interact with manmade boats. The article observes that the first two categories of animal celebrities were particularly associated with common bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) and orcas (*Orcinus orca*). The third and fourth categories featured a more diverse cast of species, such as walruses and beluga whales, although they still included dolphins and orcas.

The article introduces a method it terms "following the animal" to trace animal celebrity representation across various forms of media over an extended period of time. Examining how oceanic animal celebrities have been framed in the media through an explorative discourse analysis, the article considers what the discursive construction of these animal celebrities may indicate about broader public sentiments towards the protection of these animals and their oceanic habitats. The article argues that the different types of MMCs reflect shifting trends in the protection desired for oceanic environments and animals, as well as the perceived agency afforded to marine mammals. Both in the methods section and conclusion, the article suggests avenues for future research to further explore these categories and trends in greater breadth and depth. Before diving into this analysis, the following section introduces readers to the central concepts and existing research that inform the study, including marine imaginaries, animal celebrities, and anthropomorphic empathy.

2. Animalising Marine Imaginaries

Imaginaries are "shared discourses and practices that reproduce a social group's values, norms, and beliefs" (Anderson et al., 2023, p. 74; see also C. Taylor, 2004). This article explores imaginaries in the oceanic context, contributing to the research on popular representations of human and more-than-human actors in oceanic settings. The article thus engages with the concept of "ocean pop" coined by the editors of this thematic issue. As noted in the introduction of this thematic issue, the concept of ocean pop is defined as the "portrayal of oceanic spaces, issues, and both human and non-human actors within popular media" (Gehrke & Menzel, in press). The following section addresses the relevance and potential impacts of this media portrayal, as well as the public perceptions it fosters, beginning with a brief introduction to what makes an animal celebrity, followed by a short discussion of the empathetic response these celebrities may elicit.

2.1. Mediatised Animals

This study focuses on the discursive construction of animal celebrities, specifically in the form of MMCs. In doing so, it contributes to filling the literature gap identified in conservation and celebrity studies concerning animal celebrities, with both strands of research highlighting the importance of certain species and individual animals with whom humans forge parasocial bonds. These species may be discussed as keystone or sentinel species, or ecosystem sentinels (Moore, 2008, 2023), referring to animals whose welfare can serve as an indicator for overall ecosystem health. In the conservation literature, they may also be discussed as flagship species, whose population is likely declining or otherwise affected by environmental issues, leading the respective species to serve as an "umbrella species" (A. M. Smith & Sutton, 2008, p. 127) for flora and fauna in the respective region that can illustrate the potential or actual harms of environmental threats to wider audiences (see Jepson & Barua, 2015; Williams et al., 2000).

Charismatic megafauna, in particular, are often at the centre of these discussions. Lorimer describes the "non-human charisma" that these animals are thought to embody as "the distinguishing properties of a non-human entity or process that determine its perception by humans and its subsequent evaluation" in his article by the same title (Lorimer, 2007, p. 915). In the oceanic context, the spotlight is thus often placed on charismatic marine mammals, as opposed to species that are considered less visually appealing, such as blobfish (see Probyn, 2017; Scharenberg, in press), considered too "other" and thus less suitable to anthromorphisation, including deep-sea animals and zooplankton (see Gehrke, 2024; Jamieson et al., 2021), or perceived to be too frightful to provoke caring feelings, like sharks (see Fuchs, 2018; Pepin-Neff, 2019).

While other marine animals may be as well known as some marine mammals, their public perception may operate on a different level. For instance, the shark from the 1975 Steven Spielberg movie *Jaws* may be more famous than some of the marine mammals discussed in this article. However, the shark is usually not known by name but rather by association with the film, and rather than being associated with an individual real-life shark, related discussions often centre on sharks as a whole or the animatronic sharks used for much of the film. Nevertheless, the *Jaws* antagonist had an immense impact on oceanic imaginaries, public perceptions of sharks, and related legislation, which have been thoroughly researched (see Fuchs, 2018; Pepin-Neff, 2019).

As the above example indicates, rather than focusing on entire species, this article is concerned with individual animals—animal celebrities—who may come to represent their species and shape public perceptions of it for

decades to come. According to Giles (2013, p. 11), "celebrity is essentially a process by which media turn individuals (not necessarily humans) into objects of desire," with "the media [playing] a determining role in this process." For media consumers, a celebrity can serve as an object of desire and canvas on which they project their desires, creating unequal parasocial relationships in which members of the public wish to know more about, emulate, and encounter famous strangers (Hartmann, 2016).

In particular, this article explores what Giles (2013) terms the *anthropomorphic* animal celebrity in his taxonomy of animal celebrities. According to Giles (2013, pp. 118–119), anthropomorphic animal celebrities have "human qualities attributed to them," he explains, "the animal is celebrated because of its ability (or presumed ability) to perform a behaviour thought to be uniquely human." For example, in the Hollywood era of animal celebrities analysed in this article (see Subsection 4.1.1), accounts often praised the MMC's desired human-like qualities and behaviours, such as intelligence, the ability to perform tricks, and even assist human beings.

While Giles' (2013, p. 126) examination of animal celebrity—anthropogenic and otherwise—focuses exclusively on "animals that lived most of their lives in captivity," this study demonstrates how animal celebrities increasingly include animals that do not live in captivity, although many of them still interact directly with humans. The study further expands the literature on MMCs by covering an extensive time frame (1960s to present day) and associated shifts in media culture, from the monoculture of blockbuster movies featuring animal stars to the siloed algorithms of social media showing regionally famous animal celebrities (see Chayka, 2025).

It is important to note that there is "no 'real' or 'authentic' person [or animal] at the centre [of these media discourses, neither in film or television nor on social media], and any notion of personality is simply an anthropomorphic projection" (Giles, 2013, p. 116). While this article uses the term "real" in quotation marks to refer to the animals themselves in addition to their public or stage personas (e.g., categorising the bottlenose dolphin Mitzi as the "real" animal, with Flipper being their stage name), both real and mediatised animals are discursively constructed via various forms of media (for further explorations of the real animals behind the "real" and perceived animals, see Butler, 2009, as cited in Johnson, 2015, p. 296; Despret & Latour, 2016; Kalof & Whitley, 2021, p. 289).

These mediatised animals have often been humanised, individualised, "othered" (see George et al., 2016), and distinguished from their fellow animals to a point that challenges generalisations about their respective species based on these individual animals. Yet, these animal celebrities also provide insights into how humans perceive the respective species and their attitudes and behaviours towards them. Researchers have highlighted similar problematic aspects of animal fame and related media, including animal-based conservation campaigns, press coverage, and research.

For instance, Troudet et al. (2017) introduced readers to the concept of taxonomic bias, indicating that certain species receive disproportionate attention compared to others, with the importance afforded to the animals not forcibly correlating with their role, e.g., in the respective ecosystem or the extent to which they are affected by phenomena, such as the climate crisis or ocean acidification. According to the study, birds and mammals are among those receiving the most attention (Fraser et al., 2022; Troudet et al., 2017). However, studies of social media have shown that animals previously thought to be less appealing in the

literature, such as invertebrates, do receive significant attention online (Heathcote, 2021). Many researchers encourage these trends, including Scharenberg (in press), who shares her research on "fishy imaginaries" in another article featured in this thematic issue, arguing for a broader diversity of animal celebrities to support a more comprehensive spectrum of care for the environment.

In discussing why and how humans (should) care about these animals, questions of empathy ("the ability to imagine oneself in another's place and understand the other's feelings, desires, ideas, and actions," Empathy, 2025) and anthropomorphism ("the interpretation of non-human things or events in terms of human characteristics," Guthrie, 2025) are often raised in the subject literature, as highlighted in the following subsection.

2.2. Anthropomorphic Empathy

In 1980, Michael W. Fox (1980, p. 346), the editor-in-chief of the *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*, published an editorial entitled "Empathy or Anthropomorphism?" describing the kind of "anthropomorphic projection" (Giles, 2013, p. 116) that defines animal celebrities:

> How can a person actually project his or her consciousness into another being? Preposterous, impossible…—until it is experienced….When I empathize with an animal or person, that individual's suffering becomes mine, for I experience, through imagining, that suffering. But when I anthropomorphize an animal, the reverse occurs: my suffering becomes its suffering because I judge it on the basis of my own subjective experience, as if the animal were a person. (Fox, 1980, p. 346)

The notions of celebrity and the equation of anthropomorphism and empathy are inherently entangled in this context; as Parkinson (2023, p. 93) notes, "anthropomorphisation of an animal is fundamental to their reception as a star." This article thus uses the term anthropomorphic empathy to describe the type of compassion afforded to and awarded to animals whose behaviours or appearances are framed as humanlike.

As the example of the orca Keiko, also known as Willy from the 1993 film *Free Willy*, demonstrates, anthropomorphic empathy for the public persona (see Subsection 4.1.1, Hollywood MCCs) may spur compassion for the animal actor (see Subsection 4.1.2, MCCs in Human Care). While many accounts concerning the perception of celebrity animals have been critical with reference to their welfare, scholars also point out that the care and compassion that these animals evoke can lead to greater attention, care, and engagement for environmental protection (see Gehrke, 2024; Greving & Kimmerle, 2021; Swim & Bloodhart, 2015). Exploring this symbiotic relationship between (animal) celebrities and environmental advocacy, Abidin et al. (2020), for instance, include celebrity animals, like Cecil the lion or Knut the polar bear, alongside other human and fictional examples of celebrity environmental advocates, like Steve Irwin, Jane Goodall, or Tarzan (see Dicenta, 2024; for MMC-related examples, see Epstein, 2008).

A more ambitious call for (more-than-human) empathy may imply an inherent compassion towards other beings, regardless of their appearance, mannerisms, appeal, utility to oneself, or other similarities to humans. This draws attention to Indigenous approaches decentring human perspectives, such as Todd's call for pluralistic and kinship-based approaches to human–animal relations (see Kanngieser & Todd, 2020; Todd, 2015). Furthermore, Davé (2023) highlights how colonial critiques of anthropomorphism have historically

been used to dismiss cultures in which animals, humans, and deities coexist, citing India as an example. Similarly, Despret and Latour (2016) highlight accusations of anthropomorphism as a means for researchers to claim exclusive authority to know animals.

In his 1980 editorial, Fox (1980, p. 346) suggests the term "fellow-feeling" to better capture this idea of humans empathising with animals. With growing interest in posthuman and more-than-human research in recent years (Cudworth & Hobden, 2023), scholars can observe the rise in related concepts, such as Donald's (2018, 2019) more-than-human empathy, building on Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) work on care in the discipline of science, technology, and society studies:

> More-than-human empathy moves away from the subjective notion of empathy as recognising the vulnerability of another human and opens it up to a wider assemblage inclusive of non-human others and technologies….Like care, this idea of more-than-human empathy is not [a] hard and fast theory but an experiment in caring. (Donald, 2018, p. 53)

Finally, it should be noted that many of the terms used to discuss animal celebrities and marine mammals are laden with epistemological and normative assumptions, such as ideas of wildness, the ocean, and the domestication or treatment of animals, which the article cannot fully explore due to format limitations. For example, "captivity" is still commonly used to describe animals in zoos, aquaria, and other manmade enclosures, and it appears frequently in the materials analysed for this study. Meanwhile, experts often also use the term "in human care," suggesting a higher level of care, even though it is often employed interchangeably with "captivity" (cf. Brando et al., 2018). This article adopts the term "human care" to align with existing research and highlight the language shift reflecting changing attitudes towards animals in captivity, especially those caught in the wild for display (see Subsection 4.1.2). The next section describes how the animal celebrities studied were identified and how discourse around them was analysed.

3. Methods and Materials

3.1. Identifying Celebrities

In identifying celebrity animals, the author established three criteria based on the study's focus and existing literature on animal celebrities. For the purpose of this study, animal celebrities need to (a) be characterised as marine mammals; (b) be identified by individual personal names, similar to those assigned to humans or companion animals, such as Reggie or Freya; and (c) connect to real-life animals (cartoon characters with no distinct real-life animal on which they were based were excluded, whereas animals in fictional narratives relating to and embodied by "real" marine mammals were included). Media discussing MMCs also predominantly use gendered personal pronouns (he/she), as is common with fellow humans or companion animals, such as dogs, rather than gender-neutral ones used for subjects without personalised identities (it), further adding to their personification and anthropomorphisation (see Gouabault et al., 2011; Scharenberg, in press).

To select the most well-known animals, the author compared online listicles of famous marine mammals. Following an initial overview of online rankings of famous marine mammals, the study identified five groups of marine mammals to focus on in the analysis of MMCs: dolphins, orcas, seals, walruses, and whales

(including beluga, grey, and humpback whales). It should be noted that these group names do not correspond uniformly to a specific taxonomic rank; rather, they denote popular categories (e.g., with orcas both categorised as dolphins and whales, as described in the following paragraph). Next, the author analysed online listicles concerning each of the five groups (see, for example, Gunther's [2019] *10 of the World's Most Famous Whales* or Renovables [2025] *The Most Famous Whales in the World and Their Stories*) as well as searching for stories about each of the five groups in news publications. Here, the listicles mitigated the recency bias in news reports by including historically famous animals, such as the dolphin Flipper. For the news analysis, the author searched online archives of individual English-language newspapers of record, including the *New York Times* and *The Guardian*. The two newspapers were chosen after piloting the search in various newspapers of record, including *The Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, and finding that the two selected yielded more substantive animal-based search results.

For each search, the study examined the first five news stories (excluding mismatches, such as stories about the Miami Dolphins, an American football team, or the musician Seal), noting whether the story mentioned a celebrity animal and, if so, recording the name of the celebrity animal. To identify MMC-related articles, the author employed animal-based keyword searches using group labels, including "dolphin(s)," "whale(s)," "walrus(es)," and "seal(s)." In the case of orcas, which are taxonomically the "largest member of the dolphin family (Delphinidae)" (Killer Whale, 2025), this keyword search resulted in conflicting representations, as orcas were at times considered dolphins and at other times described as whales, often using their alternative descriptor "killer whales." Since the article is concerned with the public perception of the animals, including prominent misconceptions, orcas described as whales as well as orcas classified as dolphins were included in the coding process.

The newspaper and listicle analysis showed that a few animal groups (especially dolphins and orcas) and some of their most famous representatives (Flipper, Winter, and Keiko) appeared much more frequently compared to others. To narrow the study's focus to specific MMCs (see Table 1), celebrity animals were selected based on the frequency and relative prominence of their mentions (how often they were identified by name, how high on the listicles they were listed, and how much importance news sources attributed to them). It is notable that despite the broad public interest in seals and California sea lions (*Zalophus californianus*) making up the largest share (27%) of marine mammals housed in zoos and aquaria (Brando et al., 2018), only a few locally or regionally known seal celebrities were identified through the coding process, such as the seal pup Chappy who appeared on a busy street in Connecticut (US), or the grey seals Pinkafo and Frisbee who were rescued on the Norfolk coast (UK).

Table 1. Overview of identified MMCs by group.

	Dolphins	Orcas	Seals	Walruses	Whales
MMCs (in alphabetical order)	Mitzi, also known as (aka) Flipper	Iberian orca subpopulation	Chappy	Freya	Delta and Dawn
	Reggie	Keiko, aka Willy	Pinkafo and Frisbee	Wally	Hvaldimir
	Winter	Tahlequah			Putu, Siku, and Kanik, aka Bonnet, Crossbeak, and Bone

Depending on the popularity of the respective animal group, two to three celebrities were identified. The author selected animals from different time periods where possible (see Table 2). When groups of animals became collectively famous, they were counted as one: The humpback whales Delta and Dawn, observed together in San Francisco Bay in 2007; the grey seals Pinafo and Frisbee, known for having a flying frisbee stuck around their necks; the grey whales Putu, Siku, and Kanik (also known as Bonnet, Crossbeak, and Bone), popularized through Operation Breakthrough ("Oct 7, 1988 CE," 2023); and the Iberian orca subpopulation, known for ramming and sinking boats in the Mediterranean. In cases when a single stage name, such as Flipper, was assigned to multiple "real" animals, the analysis focused on the animal with whom the stage name was first made famous.

Table 2. Overview of MMC categories and associated animals, the media formats through which they became famous, and public response.

	Category description	Animal celebrities (name(s) and species)	Primary media formats and time periods
Hollywood	Animals that were captured by humans in the open ocean and brought to aquaria, who were then cast as celebrities based on their roles in traditional mass entertainment	Flipper, aka Mitzi (bottlenose dolphin)	Fictional films and television (1960s–1990s)
		Willy, aka Keiko (orca)	
In human care	Animals in aquaria whose celebrity revolved around public outcries concerning their treatment in human care and demands to release them back into the open ocean	Keiko, aka Willy (orca)	Documentary films and series (1990s–2010s)
Rescued	Animals that humans cared for after the marine mammals were injured in the ocean	Winter (bottlenose dolphin)	Fictional and documentary films and series, news, and later social media (1980s–present)
		Putu, Siku, and Kanik, aka Bonnet, Crossbeak, and Bone (grey whales)	
		Delta and Dawn (humpback whales)	
		Pinkafo and Frisbee (grey seals)	
		Chappy (grey seal)	
Endangered and dangerous	Animals in the open ocean who appeared to seek out human company, display human-like behaviors, or interact with manmade boats	Tahlequah, aka J35 (orca)	Social media and news (2010s–present)
		Iberian orca subpopulation (orca)	
		Hvaldimir (beluga)	
		Freya (walrus)	
		Wally (walrus)	
		Reggie (bottlenose dolphin)	

Note: The stage name (Willy) and celebrity name (Keiko) are switched between the "Hollywood" and "in human care" MMC categories to reflect the identity for which the animal was most famous in association with the respective category and time period.

3.2. Following the Animal

Having identified 13 animal celebrities (individuals, pairs, and groups), the author sought to immerse themselves in popular culture discourses about them. To do so, the author developed the methodological approach of "following the animal" through various forms of media. In addition to analysing news coverage about each of the animal celebrities identified via a Google keyword search using the respective animal's name (e.g., Flipper) and group (e.g., dolphin), the researcher consequently sought out content about the respective animal in other media too. Here, the author aimed to analyse the media for which the animals are most known (e.g., the movie *Dolphin Tale* for the dolphin Winter), identified via online research using a Google keyword search.

The ability to transcend different types of media is critical for examining popular culture artefacts, as public perceptions of these are likely shaped through various media, including news coverage, fictional films or television shows, documentaries, and more (cf. Cook, 2004). By "following the animal," the author is thus not limited to simply one medium but can draw on a wide variety of representations. Often, the analysis of one medium, such as a magazine article, organically led to the review of another piece of media mentioned therein. In analysing the media content (news and magazine articles, online listicles, books, movies, television episodes, documentary films, and podcast episodes), the author sought to understand dominant discourses, identifying ways in which the respective celebrity animals were predominantly framed. Based on this analysis of dominant discourses, four categories of MMCs emerged, as detailed in Section 4.

Although this article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of MMCs, certain limitations apply. Like every analytical approach, "following the animal" is not without its limitations, as results are, for instance, shaped by search engine algorithms, and many materials may be difficult to access, requiring additional time or financial resources to locate. This is particularly the case for historic materials, such as those associated with the oldest MMC analysed in this study, Flipper (aka Mitzi, who died in 1972).

Furthermore, the article utilises discourse analysis, a subjective approach to research (see S. Taylor, 2013), to analyse MMCs as popular culture artefacts, examining dominant discourses concerning these animals in news publications, television shows, movies, and online listicles. Furthermore, due to the language in which this study was conducted, the results were likely skewed towards animal celebrities popular in regions where English-language texts are frequently read.

Additionally, the materials analysed for this article are not exhaustive—by virtue of the animals being celebrities, there is a wealth of material about them. Future studies may attempt to analyse *all* the material available on one of these animals, though a completely comprehensive analysis may be impossible. The article focused on the most widely consumed materials, which likely reflect the materials that inform the broader public's perception of these animals. While the article covers a broad temporal range and a wide array of marine mammals and media formats, it remains difficult to generalise based on a select few examples.

Finally, due to format, time, and resource constraints, the study does not account for mentions of MMCs in other popular culture formats. Particularly with examples of older animals that have since passed away, modern audiences may be more familiar with them through references in other popular culture formats rather than the original source material. For instance, young adults today may not have watched the 1963

film *Flipper* (Clark, 1963) or the 1964–1967 series by the same title (Browning, 1964–1967). Yet, as the news and listicle analysis performed for this article shows, they are likely still familiar with the famous dolphin. Further research would be required to assess how exactly these audiences learned of the dolphin's existence. One may speculate that younger audiences watched remakes of the original media, like the 1996 movie *Flipper* (Shapiro, 1996) or the 1995 television series *Flipper* (Crombie, 1995–2000), or encountered stories of or references to the famous animal in films, like *Apollo 10 ½: A Space Age Childhood* (Linklater, 2022), documentaries, like *The Cove* (Psihoyos, 2009) or television shows, such as *Golden Girls* (T. Hughes, 1989), as well as parodies, like *The Muppets Tonight* show (Halvorson, 1996).

4. Results

4.1. MMCs: *From Flipper to Freya*

The analysis of media featuring MMCs led to the identification of four categories of animal celebrities, as illustrated in Table 2 and outlined in the following subsections. While the four categories overlap, in some cases including the same animal celebrities in multiple categories, they also represent different, though also partially overlapping, periods in time, thus reflecting shifting attitudes towards marine mammals from the 1960s to the present day.

The categories also demonstrate shifting attitudes towards MMCs in human care—from the fascination for seemingly companion-animal-like MMCs, such as Flipper (Subsection 4.1.1), to demands for the release of captive orca, exemplified by the Free Keiko campaign (Subsection 4.1.2), to the move towards human care for injured and lost animals (Subsection 4.1.3), and ultimately the focus on wild animals in the ocean (Subsection 4.1.4). In doing so, the categories also offer insights into the non-human agency (see Lorimer, 2007) of animal celebrities, which is restricted by human actors and infrastructure for almost all the examined MMCs, with a few notable exceptions discussed in the final subsection (Subsection 4.1.4). This transition from MMCs removed from the ocean to their return to the ocean, and ultimately to marine mammals becoming famous in their natural habitat reflects broader trends in ocean imaginaries and conservation, from the focus on protecting specific flora and fauna and addressing individual problems to an ecosystem-based approach and a focus on transboundary threats (see Moore, 2023).

Another notable shift reflected in the categories concerns the decline of monoculture in media, with the move away from a common cultural vocabulary shaped by Hollywood-produced films and television shows, such as *Flipper* and *Free Willy*, towards a more complex media structure, including the emergence of algorithmically curated online content. The study shows that this change in media trends aligns with the shifts in the perception of MMC animal welfare described in the above paragraph, and a move from fictionalised MMCs towards a greater focus on the "real" animals, though fictional MMC narratives do not entirely come to a halt. For instance, while the orca Keiko first became famous for its titular role in *Free Willy* (Wincer, 1993) and the "real" orca became famous as a result, the emphasis in news and fictional media concerning the bottlenose dolphin Winter is on the "real" animal that inspired the stories. Furthermore, despite the move away from media monoculture, marine mammals continue to be cast in the role of celebrities. While the number of almost globally recognised household names, such as Flipper, has declined, the study observes an increase in the number of regionally famous animals, such as the UK's dolphin Reggie and walrus Wally or Norway's beluga whale Hvaldimir and walrus Freya.

The comparatively large number of celebrity animals associated with the fourth category of endangered and dangerous marine mammals in the analysed media coverage may be due to (a) the shift from monoculture to social media (see Chayka, 2025) producing several lesser or more regionally known animal celebrities compared to fewer media industry-curated film stars and documentary protagonists, (b) the recency bias of the media sources used to identify celebrity marine mammals (see Section 3), and (c) the concerning trend of an increasing number of marine mammals seeking out human contact. The latter has been recorded and analysed by casual observers, journalists, marine biologists, and zoologists, with many attributing the trend to increasing human infringement on traditional habitats and anthropogenic environmental changes, including the climate crisis (see Subsection 4.1.4, Endangered and Dangerous MMCs).

4.1.1. Hollywood MMCs

The first category concerns animals that were captured by humans in the open ocean. They were then transported to aquaria and taught to perform certain behaviours, and eventually cast as celebrities based on their roles in Hollywood-produced blockbuster movies. This category is the only one which predominantly focuses on animal stars, whose star persona was carefully crafted by the American film industry, rather than celebrities whose fame often spans beyond the medium of film including news reporting and social media, though both stars and celebrities' fame is discursively constructed "through…complex representational processes" (Parkinson, 2023, p. 95).

The two most famous examples of this category are the bottlenose dolphin Mitzi, best known for playing the titular role in the 1963 movie *Flipper*, and the orca Keiko, who became famous for portraying Willy, the main animal character in the 1993 film *Free Willy*. While the "real" orca Keiko would eventually become famous in their own right (see subsequent Subsection 4.1.2, MMCs in Human Care), Mitzi and other animal actors of her generation were better known by their stage name, which lived on as other dolphins also played the role of Flipper. While earlier media coverage concerning the animal film stars (both "real" animals and the roles they portray) focused on the animals' intelligence and ability to fascinate audiences, in more recent decades, discussions have increasingly revolved around the MMCs' welfare, as detailed in the following subsection.

4.1.2. MMCs in Human Care

The second category concerns animals that were captured in the wild and whose welfare in human care became a source of public outcry, with many demanding the animals' release back into the open ocean. The most famous examples of this category all concern orcas. While this article focuses on Keiko (aka, Willy), other famous orcas associated with this category include the orcas Shamu and Tilikum, the subject of the famous documentary *Blackfish* (Cowperthwaite, 2013), who were exhibited and performed in shows at Sea World, a marine theme park chain.

The public outcry to release the orca Keiko following the popularity of *Free Willy*, using the slogan "Free Keiko," was ultimately successful, with more than 20 million US dollars spent on preparing the orca for release, transport, and ensuring its continued survival once out in the open ocean (Colby, 2018). While Keiko's release was considered a failure with the orca returning to its keepers to be fed and seeking out human company, scientists maintained: "In terms of giving Keiko a better life, it was 100 percent successful," explaining that the release failed because the orca had been "captured young and…held in captivity too long

for him to break ties with humans" (Doughton, 2009, para. 3, 10). Furthermore, media coverage concerning Keiko's fame and release often stressed the significance of Keiko's example for broader demands to release captive marine mammals; as Alarcón (2024, 32:48–32:53, emphasis added) puts it in his podcast series about Keiko: "What if Keiko, the *individual*, could become Keiko, the *symbol*?"

Others, however, pointed to the crux of celebrity animal culture, arguing that the immense effort and resources poured into making a (positive) example of Keiko may have yielded more good if they had been distributed more broadly. As Malene Simon Hegelund, senior scientist at the Greenland Institute of Natural Resources and co-author of a study assessing Keiko's release (Simon et al., 2009), explained: "The fortune spent on Keiko might have been better invested in conservation programs to protect whales and their habitat….But that's not as appealing as the adventures of a single whale" (Doughton, 2009, para. 30).

4.1.3. Rescued MMCs

The third category of MMCs concerns animals that were cared for by humans after being injured in the ocean. These animals are also often cited as positive examples of marine mammals successfully reintroduced to their oceanic habitat or whose continued life in human care is justified by the likelihood that their release into the open ocean would fail or lead to the animal's suffering or death. For instance, in discussions of Keiko's failed release, the orca Springer (aka, A73) is sometimes cited as a positive counterexample, having been briefly held in a pen after the animal was found lost near Seattle in January 2002, and successfully reintroduced to its birth pod in Puget Sound later that year (see, for example, Doughton, 2009).

Examples of rescued MMCs can be divided into two subcategories: The first concerns animals found and helped in the open ocean, like the humpback whales Delta and Dawn, a mother and calf who were observed swimming up the Sacramento river ("the wrong way") in 2007. They were treated with antibiotics for their wounds and returned to the open ocean (S. Hughes, 2007). Another example can be found in the grey whales known by their Iñupiat names Putu, Siku, and Kanik (English names: Bonnet, Crossbeak, and Bone). The whales were first discovered trapped amid pack ice in the Beaufort Sea by an Iñupiaq Hunter in early October 1988, and their story quickly spread and soon garnered international media attention ("Oct 7, 1988 CE," 2023). After initial efforts to free the whales failed, the US State Department requested the assistance of Soviet icebreakers, which managed to clear a path for the whales to escape in late October ("Oct 7, 1988 CE," 2023). The operation was considered successful, although the youngest whale (Kanik) died before they were freed, and the status of the two remaining whales was unknown once they swam away ("Oct 7, 1988 CE," 2023). This may indicate that anthropomorphic empathy only extends as long as humans can observe the animals.

The second concerns animals that were transported to veterinary or animal care facilities, with the animals either being successfully treated and released back into the ocean, continuing to receive care in the respective facility, or dying despite treatment. The grey seal pup Chappy is an example of the last option, having been found on a busy street in the American town of New Haven, Connecticut, and being taken into human care, but later dying due to an intestinal disease (Hassan, 2025). By contrast, the grey seals Frisbee and Pinkafo were found along the Norfolk coast in 2017 and 2018, respectively, with a flying ring (used to play frisbee) around their necks, from which they were freed by volunteers and successfully released back into the ocean (J. Hobson, 2025).

Finally, perhaps the most famous example of a dolphin rescued, treated, and continuing to live out its days in human care concerns the bottlenose dolphin Winter, who was found entangled in a crab trap line as a young dolphin in 2005, losing its tail flukes and parts of its tail as a result. The dolphin was then treated at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium, where it managed to swim and was eventually fitted with the world's first functional prosthetic dolphin tail. Winter's story went on to inspire the book *Winter's Tail* (Hatkoff et al., 2011), the films *Dolphin Tale* (C. M. Smith, 2011) and *Dolphin Tale 2* (C. M. Smith, 2014), and even a Nintendo DS videogame (Moby Games, 2009). These films that made Winter famous also raise questions concerning the mixed use of footage from the "real" dolphin Winter's medical treatment and the curated material explicitly filmed for the purpose of the *Dolphin Tale* movies. The use of "real" and "mediated" content highlights questions concerning the relationship between "authentic" footage of "real" animals and its ability to evoke emotions and desire to protect animals compared with artistic and synthetic animal celebrities, such as those depicted in and via cartoons, animatronics, animation, CGI, and more (see Koutras, 2023, for an exploration of indexical realism in film). Furthermore, these films often highlight anthropogenic aspects of dolphin behaviour or physique. For instance, in *Dolphin Tale 2*, the fictional main character Sawyer Nelson explains, "science doesn't know whether dolphins feel emotions the way we do: fear, joy, sadness. But their brains are as complex as ours….So, like always, we treated her [the dolphin] as gently as we treat one of us" (C. M. Smith, 2014, 02:21–02:39). Similarly, media coverage concerning Winter often noted the dolphin inspiring human amputees, especially children, with Winter described as "an ambassador for prostheses" (Anthes, 2013).

4.1.4. Endangered and Dangerous MMCs

The final category of MMCs concerns animals living in the open ocean, who appear to seek out human company, display human-like behaviours, or interact with manmade boats. The celebrity animal examples in this category can be classified into two groups: First, the beluga whale Hvaldimir, the walruses Freya and Wally, and the bottlenose dolphin Reggie concern wild animals that sought out and interacted with humans and boats. Second, the orca Tahlequah and the Iberian orca subpopulation concern wild animals whose contact with human infrastructure, or lack thereof, marks a significant departure from how the other animals analysed in this study have been discussed in the media.

Though each animal's story in the first group maps a slightly different outcome of close human contact, as detailed in the following paragraphs, the dominant framing of media coverage of Reggie, Freya, Wally, and Hvaldimir, respectively, notes concern for their safety due to their proximity to humans. Of the four animals, the beluga whale, Hvaldimir (also sometimes spelt Whaledimir), was the only one spotted in the ocean that was believed to have previously been in human care. The whale received its name—a combination of Russian President Putin's first name, Vladimir, and the Norwegian word for whale (*hval*)—from a Norwegian radio show after first being spotted by a Norwegian fisherman in 2019 (Treisman, 2024).

At the time, the whale was wearing a camera harness with the imprint "Equipment St. Petersburg," and subsequent news coverage playfully framed Hvaldimir as a "Russian spy whale" (Treisman, 2024). While researchers have traced the history of marine mammals used for military operations (see Colby, 2020), and the news outlet *Barents Observer* obtained satellite images of an Arctic marine mammal facility of the Russian navy, from which Hvaldimir was speculated to originate (Nilsen, 2019), news coverage and online content concerning the whale primarily focused on its interactions with humans, including being petted and

fetching a phone and a camera that had been dropped in the ocean. As Hvaldimir continued to seek out humans and boats, animal advocates and legislators explored long-term solutions, including setting up a sanctuary in the Norwegian fjord and reintroducing the whale to a wild beluga population around Svalbard, which would prevent the animal from harm resulting from interactions with humans. However, the whale died in 2024 before these plans could be realised.

Another Norwegian animal celebrity, the walrus Freya, was first spotted in the capital city of Oslo in the summer of 2022 (McCarthy, 2023). The walrus was often observed resting on boats, some of which sank as a result. Norwegian authorities issued warnings not to approach Freya due to the danger posed to oneself and the animal, a call echoed in news coverage and social media content discussing Freya. Yet, as humans were repeatedly observed in close proximity to Freya and the walrus appeared to be in distress, Freya was ultimately euthanised (McCarthy, 2023). In a statement concerning the decision, the Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries (2023, as cited in McCarthy, 2023, para. 12) explained that "the possibility for potential harm to people was high and animal welfare was not being maintained." By contrast, a little over a decade earlier, news coverage of the walrus Wally's appearance in the UK, France, Spain, and Iceland also mentioned people observing the walrus' behaviour. Yet, the focus of news reporting was on concerns that the animal had ventured so far south from its Arctic habitat, emphasising the impacts of the climate crisis (Bryant, 2021).

Reggie is a male bottlenose dolphin who came to Lyme Bay (UK) in 2025, making headlines for his relatively frequent encounters with humans, interacting with swimmers and kayakers, but also being hurt by a boat propeller strike around June 2025 (Davies, 2025). As of the writing of this article in early autumn 2025, analysed online discourse concerning Reggie continues to caution the public of—"he doesn't really know the harm he could be doing to us in the water" (Davies, 2025, para. 7)—and for Reggie—"the situation is becoming dangerous, for the swimmers and the dolphin. But he's not a dangerous dolphin" (Sandeman, 2025, as cited in Davies, 2025, para. 8)—perhaps alluding to Freya's fate.

In contrast to Reggie, Freya, Wally, and Hvaldimir's stories of human interaction, the cases of Tahlequah and the Iberian orca subpopulation in this category stand out as distinct outliers. First, the orca Tahlequah, also known as J35, first made headlines in 2018, when she was spotted carrying the dead body of her calf for over two weeks (17 days) over a distance of approximately 1,600 kilometres (Bragg, 2025). Though several of her calves (J47, J57) survived in the years before and since (Razek & Jackson, 2024), in January 2025, Tahlequah once again made headlines for carrying the dead body of her calf for over a week (Bragg, 2025). Tahlequah had been spotted with her living calf in December 2024, although experts had already noted that they may be in poor health (Razek & Jackson, 2024). Media coverage of Tahlequah's behaviour was exclusively framed as a mother mourning the loss of her child, notably distinguishing it from other animals discussed in this article. While the orca's behaviour is interpreted as reflecting human-like emotions, it is the only animal featured in the study that does not interact with humans, yet is observed by humans to the point of animal celebrity.

Second, approximately from 2020 onward, a pod of orcas off the Iberian Peninsula was observed interacting with boats, often pushing the rudder with their noses; while similar behaviour has been observed in other regions of the world, the Iberian orca subpopulation is most famous for this behaviour (M. Hobson, 2024). The orcas have since interacted with numerous vessels, even sinking some, with many scientists suggesting that the orcas' intention is to play rather than to attack humans; as experts from the Atlantic Orca Working Group (GTOA) explain, "there are no known direct intentional attacks on humans" and the Iberian orca

population does "not eat seals or anything that would mistake humans for food" (GTOA, n.d.; see also M. Hobson, 2024). The incidents have become so frequent and well-known that orca and sailing-based organisations, such as GTOA, have begun providing information on where orcas have been sighted and observed to ram boats, and even introduced safety recommendations and a traffic light system to inform of potential orca encounters (GTOA, n.d.).

In the context of this study, the group of orcas ramming boats represents another exception. While all the animal celebrities examined in this article are primarily discussed using individual names and in terms that demonstrate care or support for the animals in question and their welfare, the group of orcas is unique in that they are the only animals perceived to be dangerous based on their interactions with humans—or more precisely, boats that carry humans, though this distinction is not always made as explicit in the media coverage—and elicit sentiments of solidarity for their behavior. To the best of the author's knowledge, no casualties have occurred in the boat ramming incidents to date, with the people on board being rescued before their vessels sank. While the language of "attacks" is used in much of the media coverage of these incidents, it implies potentially misplaced intentionalities (cf. shark attacks in Pepin-Neff, 2019).

This is a notable departure from other incidents in which orcas in human care have been observed as attacking and, in some cases, injuring and killing humans. In these incidents, the orcas' behaviour towards humans has been at least initially assessed negatively, with orcas framed as lashing out against their keepers, though many accounts also emphasised empathy for the animals' condition and welfare in human care (see Subsection 4.1.2, MMCs in Human Care). In the case of the orca subpopulation ramming boats, much of the discourse concerning the orcas' behaviours is entangled in notions of class and capitalism, for instance, with the orcas being framed as avengers of polluted oceans, striking the yachts of the rich who are thought to contribute to this ecological crisis through their conspicuous consumption. Some statements in support of the Iberian orca population also cited other orca-MMCs discussed in this article, linking wild MMCs to those in human care. For instance, a popular tweet poses the rhetorical question, "Y'all raised an entire generation on free Willy [sic] and expect us to take the yacht's side???" (Nicholas, 2023, as cited in LeBel, 2025).

As briefly noted in Subsection 4.1, these outliers and the rising number of wild animal celebrities identified in this category of MMCs may be related to a shift in the media landscape amid the proliferation of smartphones with higher-quality cameras and internet capabilities and platforms for image and video sharing. We thus observe a shift from curated and scripted media content of MMCs to unscripted animal behaviours becoming the basis of celebrity. This may imply a growing public desire for "authentic" visuals of marine mammals in their "natural" environment, contrasting the mass of curated influencer and AI-generated content. Future research should investigate these media trends and outlier cases in further detail.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this article investigated representations of celebrity marine mammals in popular culture, introducing the methodological approach of "following the animal" to identify four categories of animal celebrities: (1) Hollywood MMCs, (2) marine mammals in human care, (3) rescued marine mammals, and (4) endangered and dangerous marine mammals. The findings demonstrate a shift in the categories and groups of animal celebrities and their origins, noting the driving factors of the changing media landscape and the symbiotic relationship between animal celebrities, welfare, and conservation. In doing so, the article

addresses the tension between the individualisation and anthropomorphisation of celebrity animals and their role in reflecting and shaping marine imaginaries, highlighting that the framing of celebrity animals reflects and reinforces dominant discourses in ocean conservation. Each of the four categories enables specific care and management regimes, building on different kinds of anthropomorphism, from audiences praising Hollywood stars for their human-like intelligence, to sympathising with orcas held in captivity, to caring for animals in need of medical assistance, and ultimately the complicated mixture of fear, fascination, and empathy for wild animals perceived as performing human emotions and behaviours. The article highlights how these changing attitudes towards animal welfare and conservation are reflected and affected by popular culture artefacts concerning MMCs. Further research should explore the breadth and depth of (marine) animal celebrity and the ongoing trend of MMCs defying previous conventions concerning the agency of animal celebrities and the type of contact they have with humans and human infrastructures. Furthermore, future research should explore the relationship between marine care facilities and the cultivation of animal celebrities, as exemplified by the dolphin Winter and the Clearwater Marine Aquarium.

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In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Anja Menzel (University of Bamberg/University of Johannesburg).

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, Charlotte Gehrke, upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

This article was written without LLM tools, with the exception of autocorrect functions to ensure correct spelling and grammar.

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