# Killer whales Wikie and Keijo remain stuck in limbo after Marineland closure



Two killer whales currently held at the now-closed Marineland Antibes marine zoo in southern France remain without a new home, as efforts to relocate them have met significant obstacles. Wikie, aged 23, and her 11-year-old son Keijo were born and raised at Marineland, which ceased operations as a marine zoo in January 2024. Despite the zoo's closure, the animals remain under its legal care until a suitable relocation is found.

The French government is facing mounting pressure over the whales’ future. An application to transfer Wikie and Keijo to Loro Parque, a marine park in Tenerife, Spain, has been blocked by Spanish authorities. Loro Parque currently houses four orcas and recently welcomed a newborn calf. The blockage was unexpected, with many activists having anticipated the transfer to be a straightforward formality.

The Spanish scientific panel responsible for the decision determined that Loro Parque's facilities do not meet minimum standards for adequate surface area, volume, and depth necessary for the optimal housing of the orcas. This verdict was acknowledged by experts such as Dr Jan Schmidt-Burbach, head of animal welfare and wildlife research at World Animal Protection, who described the ruling as “unexpected but rational.” Commenting to the BBC, he said it highlights “the fact that marine parks are an outdated industry with dropping acceptability in society.” Loro Parque responded by asserting their facilities are recognised by independent assessors as providing some of the highest levels of animal welfare globally.

The Whale Sanctuary Project (WSP), a group advocating for the creation of whale sanctuaries where animals have greater freedom and are not compelled to perform or breed, is campaigning for Wikie and Keijo to be moved to its proposed site in Nova Scotia, Canada. Lori Marino, president of the WSP, told the BBC that their sanctuary in Port Hilford Bay is “the only option left,” as French authorities have not identified any suitable European sanctuary and have rejected relocation efforts to a marine park in Japan.

The WSP has already undertaken environmental studies and water quality assessments at the proposed Canadian site. They have secured a lease offer from Canada’s department of natural resources and plan to enclose a section of the bay using 1,600 metres of netting. The project team includes individuals involved in creating the whale sanctuary for Keiko, the orca star of the 1993 film Free Willy.

However, this proposal has previously been rejected by the French ministry for ecology, and as of now, no definitive site has been approved in Europe. French ecology minister Agnès Pannier-Runacher indicated in February that a European sanctuary was being sought but warned, “If you don't even have a site, you're years away from being a viable sanctuary.” She described the transfer to Loro Parque as a temporary measure to bridge the gap until a European sanctuary could be prepared. Animal rights advocates expressed concern such a transfer might become permanent if delayed.

Officials at Marineland emphasise the pressing nature of the orcas’ situation. They describe sanctuaries as a “hypothetical” solution that “will take years” to develop and stress that Wikie and Keijo “must leave now” for their welfare. Although the zoo has ceased operations, its management remains legally responsible for the whales’ care until a relocation is secured.

The debate over the whales’ future highlights broader tensions about the welfare of captive marine animals and the challenges involved in providing suitable environments outside traditional marine parks. With Marineland closed and immediate relocation options complicated, the fate of Wikie and Keijo remains uncertain as authorities and advocacy groups continue to seek a resolution.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://whalesanctuaryproject.org/spain-rejects-marineland-antibes-plan-to-transfer-orcas-to-zoo-in-canary-islands/> - This URL supports the claim that Spain rejected the plan to transfer Wikie and Keijo to a zoo in the Canary Islands, and highlights the Whale Sanctuary Project's efforts to relocate the orcas to a sanctuary in Nova Scotia.
2. <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20250411-rights-group-urges-france-to-move-orcas-to-sanctuary-after-spain-refused-transfer> - This URL corroborates the information that rights groups are urging France to move the orcas to a sanctuary following Spain's refusal to allow the transfer to Loro Parque in Tenerife.
3. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250410-orcas-dolphins-stuck-in-closed-french-marine-park> - This URL provides context on the situation at Marineland Antibes, where the orcas and dolphins are currently stuck after the park's closure and Spain's refusal of the transfer.
4. <https://www.idausa.org/campaign/cetacean-advocacy/latest-news/save-marineland-antibes-orcas-from-continued-exploitation/> - This URL supports efforts by advocacy groups to ensure the orcas are moved to a sanctuary rather than another marine park.
5. <https://oceanographicmagazine.com/news/fate-of-france-s-last-two-performing-killer-whales-remains-uncertain/> - This URL discusses the uncertain fate of Wikie and Keijo, including previous considerations for relocation to Japan and the current push for a sanctuary in Nova Scotia.
6. <https://www.noahwire.com> - This URL is cited as the source for the original article, providing an overview of the situation with Wikie and Keijo at Marineland Antibes.
7. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpdzpzy1jwzo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data