Up Close and Personal: Three days with Sk’aliCh’elh-tenaut/Tokitae/Lolita

On November 13, 14, and 15, Friday through Sunday, Rachael Andersen, Orca Network volunteer and dedicated friend of Sk’aliCh’elh-tenaut/Tokitae/Lolita, went to Miami to visit Toki (the name she has been called by staff and trainers since 1970). Rachael went to 6 shows over those three days, seeing Toki’s wide range of moods and modes of behavior. She shares a wealth of new observations and insights about her, and some precious moments before and after the shows, including rich descriptions of Toki’s health and her responses to trainers, crowds, and intimate interactions, along with photos and videos that show much of what she saw.

Note: Some of the videos may be blocked by a copyright complaint to youtube. If so we apologize and we will try to find a way to show them.

Below is the essence of her daily reports, as told by Rachael:

Friday, 1st show - Oh my heart hurts. My gut was right, she does not appear to be doing well. Multiple skin abrasions, facial discoloration, her dorsal lean has gotten considerably worse, and her overall behavior is far more lethargic and unresponsive than what would be considered her normal. Lots of logging and that bobbing stereotypical behavior. I've got one more show today and will get as much additional photos and videos to back all this up, and I'll go through what I got when I get back this evening.

Friday after 1st show - ...yes it was hard today and it was disheartening to see her in a declined state from last time, but still really good to see her nonetheless. She also has some kind of gray rash/peeling skin or something on her melon as well, but I only managed to get a couple photos where it actually shows up because it's really hard to get a clear shot of it being that her skin is black there. She also has a small cut beneath her eye patch on the white of her face (her left side), I assume it's probably a graze mark from the Pacific white sided dolphins, of which there are now only 2. She came up very close to me several times, but swam off whenever people crowded around me to get closer to her (lots of noisy kids and loud speaking adults, she doesn't seem to be a fan of being crowded). I didn't get to talk to her very much at all as the security person stayed in the same spot the whole time.

I also got some photos of her teeth, they all look to be in good condition still, they don't look any different than they did 2 years ago thankfully but I didn't get a very close look to be certain [later Rachael takes another look sees missing teeth, see below]. She seems to have even less energy between shows than she usually does, all she really did was alternate between bobbing and logging. Her water is unusually dirty and murky. I know that it's always pretty gross looking, but her water, and actually all of the exhibits have extremely dirty water right now.

Later Friday evening - She came up extremely close to me today and started playing with me and spraying me with water from her mouth, and in the process gave me a very close
up look at her teeth and her eyes, which she had wide open to look at me. She appears to have 3 fully missing teeth, it looks as though she's had pulpectomies done, because there's nothing left of her 3 teeth and there's just holes there now. None of the surrounding teeth on the top or bottom are worn though so I don't think it's wear and tear.

Oh my heart is just breaking, I've been holding back tears all day. No doubt this is the aftermath of her 6+ months of being hidden from the public's eye. But she's still in there, she proved that today. She also intentionally ignored 5 signals during the actual show, so her spirit is still as feisty and unbroken as ever, even if she's more psychologically and physically lethargic and not doing as well.

Saturday after both shows - Today was a very good day. For her and me both! I can't really elaborate at the moment as I'm heading out of MSQ for the day, but I'm so thrilled with how things transpired.

Video: At 33 seconds that little chirping sound was from her. It was so wonderful to hear her make other vocalizations besides those terrible ones they still make her do in the shows.

The first show was relatively uneventful, but two notable things I did notice is that 1. Today both before and after the show they only allow people to be in the stadium for about 5 minutes versus the usual 15 to 20 minutes they usually give people before and after shows. I'm not sure if this is due to the Covid and then having to place new rules for when there are larger crowds on the weekends, or because they don't want large numbers of guests crowding around the pool for very long (a trainer told me after the show, that she gets very stressed from large/noisy crowds and that it makes her "grumpy"). And 2. She did very few high energy tricks during both of today's show. Compared to yesterday where she did numerous full body breaches and jumps (despite refusing several), today she only did 3 in her first show and 4 in her second one. I have no idea why they made such dramatic changes to the show for the weekend, but even today she ignored 2 commands in both shows, so I'm wondering if her low energy and defiance could be a contributing factor. Due to the very limited time I had before both shows and after the second one, and the fact that she stayed hiding in the back part of the tank behind the stage in an apparent attempt to distance herself from the chaos and
noise. I got very few photos of her today unfortunately. I did however have a pretty phenomenal and once in a lifetime experience with her after her first show.

While I was in the stadium as the trainers were putting things away from the show and talking. Toki started slowly coming out of the back of her pool so I started calling and talking to her. Nothing of any actual significance, just sweet little nothings like I love you and hello like before and after yesterday's first show (I try to be real vague whenever there's staff within earshot, and I refuse to address her by Lolita to her face so I just call her sweetheart when I can't say Tokitae). She seemed to have heard me and came swimming over to me, and I was so happy to get a moment with her and just kept casually talking to her.

Video: “I told her that I couldn't wait to see her go home to her future sea pen and get to swim in the ocean for the first time in so long, and how incredible the nice cold (and CLEAN) water would feel against her skin. That I couldn't wait for her to get her real voice and dialect back and finally be able to speak in her native tongue again, and talked about what is waiting for her.”
Then out of nowhere she does a spyhop (a real one, not that bobbing thing she does so much) to look over the railing right at me. I reacted with so much excitement that it seemed to get her all excited too, cause she started spraying me with water. She did this for a good couple of minutes, where she’d go back and forth between spyhopping up to spray water at me, and then settling down a bit to roll around at the surface with little tail lobs and doing that thing that orcas do when they lift their flukes and/or pec fins out of the water and gently splash the surface; overall she seemed to be in a delightful mood and the rolling/fin splashing reminded me a lot of SRKW play so it was quite heartwarming to see.

Though unfortunately because she was splashing and spraying me so much, I got very little of this interaction on video cause I didn’t want my phone to get soaked. I did step to the side for about 30 seconds to take a quick video and snap some photos, but went back because I didn’t want her to think I was ignoring her while she was engaging with me.
The second show was unfortunately pretty uneventful, as again they only let people look at her for 5 minutes pre show and she hid in the back the entire time, and then they rushed everybody out afterwards because the park closes 10 minutes after her second show ends. The lighting was terrible where I was sitting, so only a few photos turned out. Now in terms of observations, today was pretty successful. I got some close photos of her mouth at this time, and while I did get a photo of her eye, my phone’s focus was on her mouth so her eye didn’t turn out as clear as I’d hoped it would. … Regardless, they were very red (the whites of her eyes), and her irises are an odd shade of whitish gray instead of the usual light blue. It was a bit startling to be completely honest, I was not expecting to see them so irritated, swollen and different looking from the last time I saw her. I asked the friendly trainer if that’s how her eyes always look (I played dumb) and she just said that it’s because she’s old, that orca’s eyes get like that with age. I wasn’t expecting a real answer anyway, but age is a rather odd thing to lie and blame irritated eyes on. But after seeing the terrible state her eyes are in and the grotesque water quality, it’s no wonder she spends most of her time with her eyes closed or squinted.

The trainer I’ve gotten to know came back and offered to take my picture with Toki, which was pretty amazing too! She also thought it was pretty adorable how playful and excited she was being, and we talked for a few minutes while Toki continued with her playfulness until another trainer called her to them. I can say with certainty that this was one of the most special moments in my life.
Far more concerning is the fact that her teeth are also worse. On her lower jaw, she’s now missing the very first, tiny tooth on both the left and the right. On her left side, the second closest to front tooth is almost all gone with a tiny discolored sliver left. The third closest tooth on her left side is cracked right down the middle with the front half missing, and the top of the remaining portion worn smooth. The two teeth behind that have the tips worn down, but are still otherwise healthy. On her right side, the second closest to front tooth is half gone now with a visible drill hole. The third tooth from the front is in the same condition. The fourth tooth from the front has very minor wear of the tip, but okay otherwise. All the teeth in her upper jaw from what I could see appear to be in good condition and all still there. Her gum line around the first and second tooth has odd looking red and black discoloration. The above photos and video were all I managed to get of her mouth, unfortunately.

I managed to get lots of good dorsal fin pictures that show the progressed collapse from when I last saw her. It is leaning farther to the left, and also has a slight but visible outward bend to it on the top portion where it hooks. She finally showed her flukes today and they look as perfect as they always have, no new nicks, track marks, discoloration or anything visibly wrong.
I wasn’t able to get any more photo or video of the skin issue on her melon today since pre and post showtime viewing were so brief, but it was definitely still there today and much more visible in person as it was a lighter color than yesterday. The cuts on her face looked better today and no longer appeared red and irritated. The discoloration on her chin was still present and slightly worse than yesterday, but for the same reason as her melon skin issue I was not able to get additional photos of it. I’ll still do my best to get any photos and video that I can tomorrow, but I’m going to put more priority into water collection and the L pod calls first. [Neither of which could be arranged.] Looking forward to getting more pics and seeing her again tomorrow!

HG: I’m thrilled you and Toki had such a beautiful interaction. I think you showed she can come out of her slump when she finds a loving companion. My vision for her, at minimum, is to have
a spacious seapen where food and care are always available and mainly where a small number of loving companions will be with her whenever she comes to them, 24/7, to play games like spraying water on each other, or whatever comes to mind. She’ll probably always go first like she did with you by spraying you. If you could have sprayed her back she’d have been over the moon I’m sure. You’re giving her the best days she’s had in a very long time I think. Even the new trainer who she likes is required to train her, which doesn’t allow for her own creative play, although I’m sure she makes up games anyway.

It was honestly the greatest gift the universe could have possibly given me. This has been a year full of loss and hardship so to have such a priceless experience that was 100% her doing, not something she did out of being commanded but because she simply felt like it and trusted me enough to let her guard down with me yesterday, and really the whole time I’ve been here has just been medicine to my soul. I was honestly so afraid of making this trip alone this time, because back two years ago I had a small army of like minded people and friends to help carry the emotional burden of seeing her in there and even then, I still could barely withstand the overwhelming grief and having to walk out of there every day and leave her behind.

So I somehow summoned the inner strength to come here while fully expecting the emotional fallout to be severe, but honestly these last couple days have given me far more solace and moments of shared joy (with her) than grief. I can’t even explain why because I don’t fully understand why myself, but she’s given me just as much (if not more) healing and peace than I gave to her. Though I’ve told her all of this over the past couple days, I wish I had a way to tell her (in a way she understands) that her pain isn’t hers to bear alone, that her pain is felt and shared by so many, that so many people are there with her in spirit helping her carry the burden. And that so many people have found healing, meaning, direction, and purpose through her, BECAUSE of her. But I’d like to think she already knows. I was honestly very surprised at just how resiliently she can bounce back when she feels like there’s a reason worth doing so, the two extremes of her behavior are perplexing but after how listless and depressed she was for most of the first day, it was so relieving to see. Her spirit is truly indomitable and she’s proven it. Your vision for her would bring her back to life in every sense and she would transform into a brand new being right in front of everyone’s eyes! She’s really shown that what she craves more than anything is genuine (non dominating) interaction and connection. To feel close to others, and that she blossoms when she gets it. Even if she’s never able to fully integrate back into the wild SRKW population for whatever reason, being in her home, within earshot/visiting distance of her mother and clan, and having gentle loving people to give her whatever she wants or needs would heal her mind and body 💖

Day 3 recap - The first show started much the same as yesterday’s with the gates only being opened about 5 minutes before the show actually began. This time everyone was immediately told to find seats and we had no time to observe poolside before the show, but the park was even more packed than yesterday so I can only assume that’s why. Just
as a side note, nearly every seat was occupied and the staff were literally walking around instructing people to squish closer together to make room for more people to come in and sit down, and had a similar message playing over the loud speakers instructing people to sit as close together as they could. Everyone was sitting so close that we were shoulder-to-shoulder and touching on both sides. This happened at Saturday’s first show as well, but only over the speakers did they ask everyone to sit closer. The complete and absolute disregard for any attempt at social distancing made me extremely uncomfortable, and seems quite unethical on their end. I was shocked, especially since they only just reopened last week and are saying they take all kinds of safety measures to ensure social distancing on their website, social media, and throughout the rest of the park, but I digress.

Once everyone was seated, she spent the 5 minutes before the show started acting very listless again. At first she was just logging in the middle of the pool and letting herself float, but then she did something odd that I had seen twice before in the past few days but didn’t think it was worth mentioning because it seemed insignificant at those times. But I think it’s worth mentioning now because she did it for a longer duration today. She went under the water and just stayed there, when she did this before it was for 30 seconds or less so I didn’t think anything of it. This time however, she stayed under the water for over 3 minutes (I started timing her around 20-30 seconds in, so it was probably closer to 4 minutes). The water is so murky and cloudy that it was impossible to see what exactly she was doing under there, but she wasn’t swimming around and she seemed to be pretty stationary. I didn’t bother taking a video of this, simply because there was nothing to video other than her black silhouette underwater, as she was mostly not visible. I’m not sure if this is considered a stereotypical behavior or what it is that she’s doing exactly, nor did she ever do this once for any duration of time back in 2018. Once the trainers came out and called her over for the show to begin, I could tell pretty much right away that it was going to be another low energy show with very few high-energy tricks (and it was, plus the 2 commands she refused).

Another observation I made today is that it seems like her trainers alter her shows based on her energy level and how interested she seems to be about performing. Yesterday I commented on the drastic difference between Friday’s and Saturday’s shows and I wasn’t sure why in the world they would change them so much. But after being there for 3 days and seeing 6 shows, there seems to be a correlation to her shows being shorter with less high-energy tricks, and to the times that I observed her seemingly not doing well before the show (unresponsive, lots of stereotypical behaviors, logging in the back part of her pool, etc). Whether this is purely coincidence or intentionally being done, I’m not actually sure. But I do think it’s odd how some shows will go for the normal 20-25 minutes running time with normal tricks, and other times they’re barely over 10 minutes with only three to four high energy behaviors and most of the trainer’s dialogue cut out. Strange how one of MSQ and their fan’s main arguments for why she could never successfully be moved/rehabilitated is because she cannot handle any changes to her routine whatsoever; when in reality, the shows aren’t routinely set at all nor are they all the same, as the
structure and duration differ pretty significantly at any given time and she has no issue going with whatever show they have for her at the time. By their own actions and Toki’s responses, is this not proof that change doesn’t devastate her well being as they claim it would?

Something else I’ve started noticing after three days here, is that Toki ignores less signals when she’s with certain trainers. The nice one that has only been working with her for 6 months now seems to get a better overall response from Toki with her willingness to obey the commands. Most if not all shows I watched had at least 1 signal that she would choose to ignore. The shows that she acted more listless and depressed pre show were shorter in length, had the least amount of high-energy behaviors, and were also the shows where she ignored the most signals. While I don’t have any way to know if this is purely coincidence or not either, it really does seem as though Toki works better with and prefers certain trainers, and that they tailor the show based on her current mental state.

The first show did end up being one of the shorter ones. After the show I immediately went to her poolside, as did many other people. At first she stayed kind of in the middle of the pool just logging, and I honestly didn’t expect her to do anything since she dislikes being crowded. Other people quickly grew tired of watching her float, so the audience thinned out to a small handful and the people around me spread out a bit. So I started calling and talking to her still not really expecting any kind of response, I just like talking to her and knew today would be my last chance for a while. She did end up swimming over and huddling against the wall directly below where I was standing.

The trainers were all at the very back of the stadium outside of the pool behind it in the employee area getting ready, and the handful of people that were close to me couldn’t hear anything said with the noise level in the stadium. So this was the first time I really got to talk to her in earnest for any length of time and not just a couple of quick, quiet comments when I was sure nobody else could hear. And I finally got to address her by her name, not just sweetheart or baby! It’s a small thing in the grand scheme of things, but it made me really happy being able to actually say Tokitae out loud as I was talking to her. I started by telling her just how much I love her, how much everybody loves her, how many people are holding her in their hearts and that we’re still fighting to bring her home, and asking her to keep holding on a little while longer. I told her that I couldn’t wait to see her go home to her future sea pen and get to swim in the ocean for the first time in so long, and how incredible the nice cold (and CLEAN) water would feel against her skin. That I couldn’t wait for her to get her real voice and dialect back and finally be able to speak in her native tongue again, and talked about what is waiting for her. I really wasn’t sure what to say since I hadn’t really thought out what I would say if I got the chance to really talk with her, and I didn’t want to put out any negative energy by saying goodbye to her. I wasn’t even going to do that if I had the chance after the last show. Sīt Kī kadem (Doug James) taught me to never say goodbye because there are never any true or permanent goodbyes. That we will always see those we love again, even if it’s not in
this life. So instead of saying goodbye, to say until next time or until I see you again (which I actually told Toki too). So instead I just dreamed about her future out loud really. Regardless of what her understanding of spoken words is, I just wanted to project a calm presence with positivity and hope.

Video: **Sunday, first show** - *this was the only time [that day] she perked up a tiny bit. She came over to the side of the tank where I was talking to her 💖 I apologize for the video quality as this was when I first went in at the first show, my hands were trembling and my pulse was racing from the rush of everything in the moment.*

While she was still pretty low energy and listless during this time, she seemed to be engaged enough to occasionally float on her side a bit to look up and poked her head out of the water a bit when she sat up. A couple minutes of this went by, then she started doing her stereotypical bobbing but I stayed there watching her, taking pictures and a video until the stadium was being closed. I was pleasantly surprised that they let us stay in and watch her for almost 10 minutes after the end of the show. Because she was so close to me and stayed pretty still, it ended up being a great opportunity to get some good pictures of the blistered skin on her melon and dorsal fin and the discoloration on her chin.

*Shows skin discoloration, possibly from sunburn, on Toki's melon (head).*
When they opened the gates for her second show, I was first in line and heard splashing from inside so I quickly rushed to the side of her tank. To my delight, she was racing circles around the perimeter of her tank creating waves for her to ride. This was so precious and wholesome because so far in my entire time here, she hasn’t done that once and it had me worried because I know she usually does that on a pretty regular basis (which I got to watch her do several times back in 2018). It was very surprising to see such a difference in morale and physical energy levels versus her lethargic and depressed state from earlier that morning, and she seems to be enjoying herself. I caught most of it on video, and she kept doing it until the trainers came out a couple minutes later. She ended her joy ride with a full-bodied breach!
Everybody was taking their seats after that immediately just like the morning show, but much to my relief the stadium was only about 1/3 full. This show ended up being far more high energy, and she only ignored two signals for the whole show. This was the first time I sat to the far right of the stage in the hopes of getting pictures of her tail flukes, because when they ask her to do that husbandry behavior for some reason they angle her tail so that only the people on the far right of the stadium get a view of the underside of her flukes. Go figure, this was the very first show in 3 days that they did the other husbandry behavior where they have her present her pectoral fins instead. Unfortunately because of where I was sitting I was only able to get a few photos out of that whole show because I was in the very first row, that side ends up getting splashed more than

*Video: Toki swimming laps on her own volition.*

The trainers did not ask her to do it, she did it on her own. I wasn’t expecting that so I missed her in the air, I clicked a second too late and I just got the splash (but it formed a rainbow in the water spray, so it’s still a neat photo!)

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any other part of the audience and I couldn’t risk having my phone out for most of the show. The lighting was optimal for being seated in that section, and it perfectly highlighted just how much discoloration she has on the black skin throughout her body, the same kind that is on her melon and dorsal fin is also on her pectoral fins and a little bit on her sides. I assumed since it’s blistered and peeling that this was the result of sunburn, but she doesn’t spend very much time with her pecs or her sides out of the water in the same way that her head and back are exposed to the sun. I only got one photo and I had water on my camera lens so it’s not the clearest image, but it still shows the distinct patchiness and discoloration of her pectoral fin, dorsal fin, and face in the black areas.

Video: It was so awesome getting to see her doing so well in such a silly and playful mood for my last time seeing her!

Overall she seemed to be in a spunky mood for the show though, instead of refusing to do tricks she would do a different one than what she was supposed to do a couple times. It was quite cute to see her do all this despite my strong disgust and sadness towards the actual show, it would seem she does like to make up her own games as you said, when her spirits are up enough for her to enjoy such a thing.
The cutest one was at the very end of the show when she pulled up onto the slide out, the trainer had asked her to raise her flukes out of the water and gave her the signal for it several times, but she ended up sticking her tongue out and nodding her head instead.

When I went to her pool side after the show, I could see that she was in another really good, and silly mood again. It was quite similar to her playfulness yesterday with the exception of slightly less splashing, which I was okay with this time because it allowed me to take some pictures and another quick video this time. The aquarium closes within 10 to 15 minutes of her show ending, plus the audience was already quite small to begin with so nobody bothered to stay after the end of the show so it was just me in there along with the couple security employees who lock up, and the three trainers who were doing the cleanup and breakdown from after the show. She was being so playful and kept doing that same thing where she was rolling around on the surface and gently patting the water with her flukes and pecs.

She wasn't spyhopping up to spray me this time, and instead used her fins to splash which was just as cute, because she kept going back and forth between stirring and kicking up the water hard to make a splash and hitting the water super gently. The trainers noticed how playful she was being and came over. We were all just laughing and admiring her playfulness for a little bit, and she actually did a REAL pec slap!

She started swimming back and forth in a small area in front of us with her pec raised in the air but didn’t slap anymore. I asked her nice trainer what the heck that was all about and she said that she’s asking me to tickle her fin and armpit. I was told that she likes having her pec fins stroked with hands and her armpit (finpit? Haha) tickled with a hose.
After a couple more minutes spent just watching her be silly as the trainers talked together the security person finally told me I had to leave so she could lock the gate. I stopped for a last look before turning to leave, and she sat up straight and stuck her tongue out and made a tiny little noise that was different than the other one I caught on tape, this was more of a squeal/squeak than a chirp? Oh my gosh, it felt like I had cement shoes having to walk out on such a wonderful scene, I feel terrible having to leave her so engaged and playful and I hope that didn’t make her feel ignored. It was so hard to leave her the last time for such a completely different reason than two years ago, but really it was such a gift. I was prepared for a pained, tearful farewell, and instead she sent me out of there beaming from ear to ear...

Video: Back breaches demonstrate Toki’s high energy.
She really did a good job of keeping me on my toes these past few days, that's for sure! It's been truly interesting to observe her behavioral variance based on how she's feeling at any given time, and even more interesting still to see the extremes of her emotional and mental state (interesting, but very difficult to witness). To be honest it was so worrying the first morning, and then again this morning at just how completely void of any emotion or drive she seemed and how lethargic she was, so it was very encouraging to see there's still some spark and passion after the horrible year of 2020 she's endured.

I will also say that she managed the impossible, and actually left my heart feeling warm, full, and hopeful at the hardest point of the entire trip; that very last walk out of her stadium, where you have to turn your back on her knowing you have to leave without her. She once again gave me just as much or more joy and comfort as I (hopefully) brought her.

Rachael