resident killer whales — and equivalent to that of another wild population that lives in the waters off British Columbia, Canada.

Now, each lead author has taken aim at the work of the other. In a letter published in *Marine Mammal Science*[3], Robeck and three colleagues note that Jett and Ventre included in their 2015 study stranded animals, which might have arrived in captivity in poor health, and newborns, which are at particularly high risk of death. This pushes down the apparent survival rate of captive animals, say the researchers.

In the same journal, Jett responds[4] to that critique, and accuses Robeck's 2015 study of bias because, for instance, it compares captive whales to the southern resident population, which is endangered and exposed to pollutants and shipping traffic, and whose numbers have waxed and waned over the past four decades.

Jett says that his and Ventre's study was intended to take a wide look at captive-killer-whale survival, so they included as many data as possible. But Robeck stands by his critique. "They can include all the animals they want," he says. "The conclusions they made were not based on the evidence they showed."

DeMaster notes that the comparison that Robeck and his colleagues made between captive killer whales and a disturbed wild population is not useful. He adds that it is also difficult to compare the approaches taken by the two teams, because they analyse different animals over different periods.

On 8 March, a further group of researchers entered the fray, criticizing the 2015 Robeck study on another front. In the *Journal of Mammalogy*[6], the group charges that Robeck's study implied that evidence for a long post-reproductive lifespan in killer whales is an artefact stemming from overestimated ages of adults in the early days of research on captive killer whales. "People started looking at killer whales in the early 1970s and they weren't immediately experts," says Robeck, who has also published a response[7] to that critique.

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The authors of the critique say that the evidence for the post-reproductive lifespan, a rare evolutionary adaptation otherwise seen only in humans and in pilot whales, is robust. "There are whales still alive now that were around in the 70s that haven't had a calf," says one of the authors, Darren Croft, a behavioural ecologist at the University of Exeter, UK. It will take more observation time to put firm numbers on the post-reproductive lifespan of killer whales, says Andrew Foote, an evolutionary ecologist at the University of Bern and another of the co-authors.

The only way to resolve the dispute over the longevity of captive killer whales is for different teams to analyse the same data in the same manner, says DeMaster. Such studies could improve the well-being of captive animals by, for instance, identifying the facilities and husbandry practices that most benefit them. ■

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7. Robeck, T. R., Willis, K., Scarpuzzi, M. R. & O'Brien, J. K. *J. Mammal.* http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jmammal/gyw023 (2016).

CORRECTION

The News Feature 'The red-hot debate about transmissible Alzheimer's' (*Nature* **531,** 294–297; 2016) erroneously stated that growth hormone had been derived from the adrenal glands of cadavers. In fact, it came from the pituitary glands.