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SCIENCE & SPACE

Keiko buried in secret ceremony

Monday, December 15, 2003 Posted: 9:53 AM EST (1453 GMT)

OSLO, Norway (AP) -- Keiko, the killer whale star of the "Free Willy" movies, was buried Monday in a snow-bound pasture during the deep darkness of Nordic winter in a ceremony kept secret from the public.

"We wanted to let him be at peace," said Dane Richards, one of his caretakers. "He's free now and in the wild."

The roughly six-ton whale died Friday in a Norwegian bay where his team was trying to reintroduce him to the wild. His trainers said the likely cause of death was pneumonia.

Richards said the burial in a pasture just yards from where Keiko, about 26, died was done in secret to avoid a media circus.

Despite the whale's size, the burial went smoothly, Richards said. Machines dug a hole near the waterline, under cover of darkness, and then slid Keiko slowly a few yards across the snow into his grave, he said.

"It was beautiful. He went to the grave quietly, quickly and peacefully, just like he died," said Richards. Only seven people -- including his team and the machine operator -- were present.

Keiko, which mean's "Lucky One" in Japanese, became a darling of children through his stardom in "Free Willy," a film in which a young boy befriends a captive killer whale and coaxes him to jump over a sea park wall to freedom.

The fame prompted a \$20 million program to free Keiko from a Mexico city aquarium where he was languishing.

He was brought to the Oregon Coast Aquarium in 1996, then to Iceland, near where he was born in 1977 or 1978, for preparation for his return to the wild. When he was released in 2002, he swam 870 miles to the waters near the village of Hals, on Norway's west coast.

He became an instant hit, with so many people swimming with him and even crawling on his back, that animal protection authorities imposed a ban on approaching him.

His team coaxed him to the more remote Taknes bay, still in Hals, where they tried to coax him into a life completely in the wild. He was free to leave the bay, and sometimes did, but appeared to prefer human company.

The grave site, a lush and grassy field during the summer, was covered with snow and barely visible by daylight Monday.



Keiko became a darling of children through his stardom in the movie 'Free Willy.'

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VIDEO

Keiko, the killer whale made famous by the 'Free Willy' movies, dies of pneumonia in the Norwegian fiord where he made his home. Affiliate KOIN reports. (December 13)

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Normally, Norwegian fisheries authorities would order the remains of a large sea mammal towed to sea and sunk in deep water. However, they acted quickly during the weekend to give Keiko's backers, which included the Free Willy-Keiko Foundation and the Human Society of the United States, permission to bury the celebrity on land.

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