

Behavioural traits of a female dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) with her calf

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Abstract

In this paper, I show several behaviours of a calf (♀) (Souki), with her mother (Missie), sustained by drawings, that I observed during two years at Brighton Dolphinarium.

(The first observations were made when the calf was 49 days-old).

Introduction

It is quite rare to observe calves, in particular within a social group such as it was in Brighton when I made these observations.

I will not discuss about suckling rhythm because a paper dealing with these dolphins has already been published about this point (Eastcott & Dickinson, 1987).

I will present several typical (or rare) behaviours that are always interesting to record.

We will see that if the calf showed usual behaviours, she was quite surprising too, whether it was during the day or the night.

Pregnancy

First of all, I want to stress a point concerning pregnancy. During the time I observed Baby as she was pregnant, I often noticed that she was bending her body while she was floating on the surface (Fig. 1).

This kind of behaviour must be considered as being part of the preparation for birth (pre-natal gymnastics).

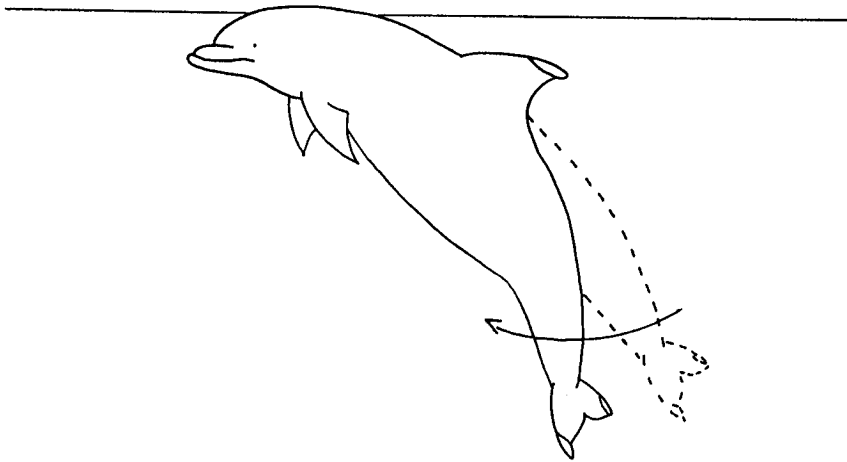


Figure 1.

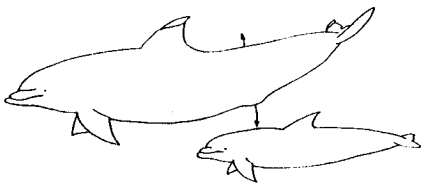


Figure 2.

Feeding

Each time, just before suckling took place, Missie came over to Souki and tapped her genital area with her back for a few seconds (Fig. 2).

I very rarely observed the calf asking for some milk, Souki tapping her rostrum on Missie's mammary glands (Fig. 3). However this behaviour did not lead to the purpose wanted because the mother swam away.

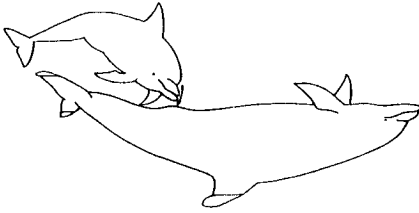


Figure 3.



Figure 4.

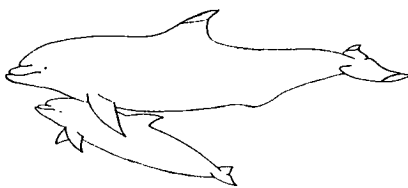


Figure 5.

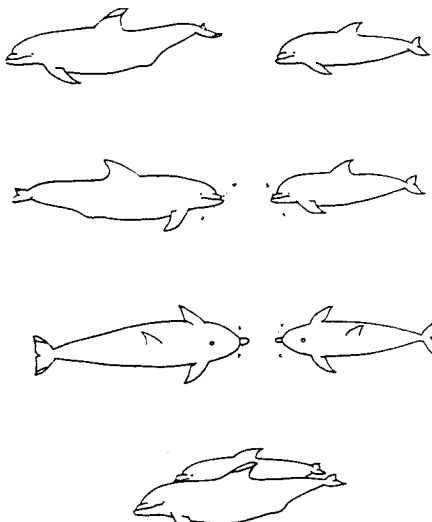


Figure 6.

Education

If Missie let her calf swim on her own, on the other hand, she then often behaved in quite a violent way with Souki. (The latter having problems to escape from her mother's determination!) The mother would push her calf or even prevent her from breathing for a few seconds (Figs 4–5).

Social behaviour

Quite rarely, Souki swam with her 'auntie' and her father. However, when this happened, the calf would quickly re-join her mother.

For example, if the calf was behind her mother, as soon as they were in front of each other, they would move their head very quickly together (communication). Then, the calf would join her mother to swim beside her (Fig. 6).

Physical contact

The mother and her calf were very often in physical contact, stroking or touching each other in different ways.

For example, the calf would stroke her mother's fluke or genital area, using one of her pectoral fins (Figs 7–8).

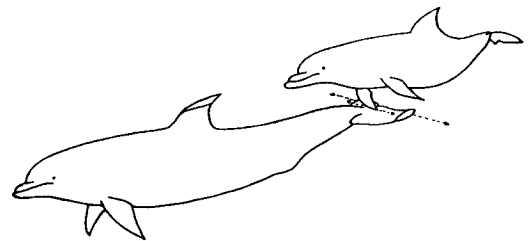


Figure 7.

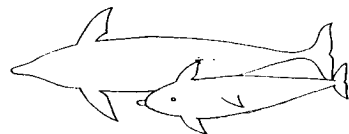


Figure 8.

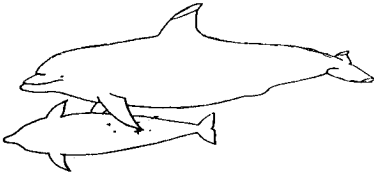


Figure 9.

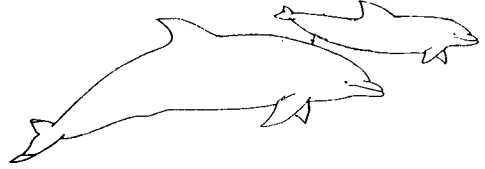


Figure 10.

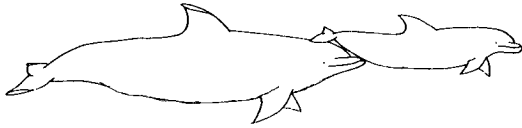


Figure 11.



Figure 12.

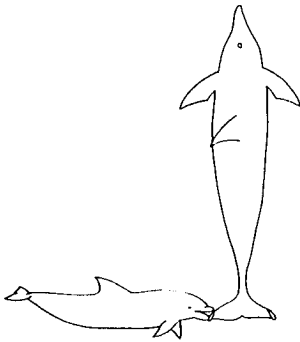


Figure 13.

On the opposite, the mother would stroke her calf's genital slit (Fig. 9). Or, she would touch it with her beak after her calf had tapped her genital area on her mother's back (Figs 10–11).

The calf would also find a way to play in these kinds of contact: she would bite her mother's dorsal fin or fluke (Figs 12–13).

Observations during the night

The night activity of dolphins, according to some scientists, is not very well known. It is usual to say that, in order to sleep (more precisely to rest), dolphins stay under water for a while and then, thanks to their fluke, regularly come up to breathe.

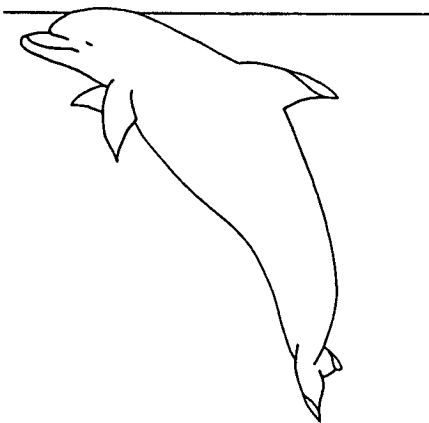


Figure 14.

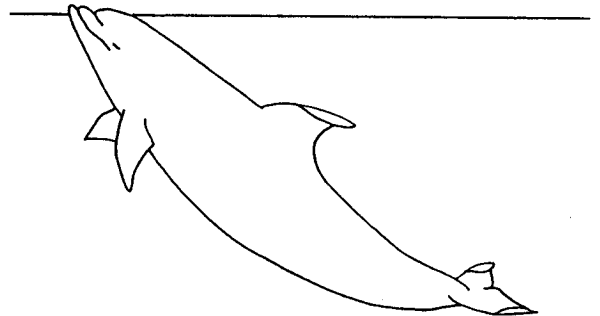


Figure 15.

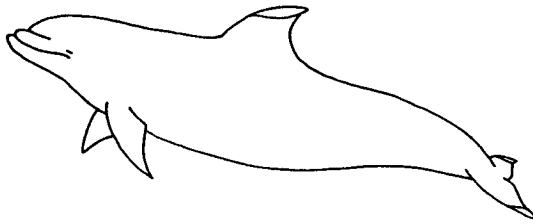


Figure 16.



Figure 17.



Figure 18.

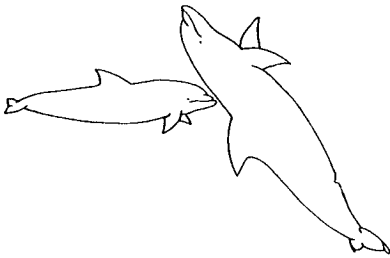


Figure 19.

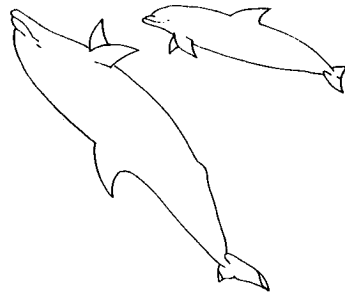


Figure 20.



Figure 21.

The observations I made over several nights contradict this fact: instead, these dolphins stay on the surface, floating for a moment and then, go back to swim before repeating that process (Figs 14-16).

Several behaviours happened by the end of the night: the mother, resting or moving very slowly, was often 'visited' by her calf (the latter wanting to touch or push her mother) (Figs 17-19).

When the mother and her calf were resting together, they were very often close to each other (Fig. 20). The mother would sometimes splash her calf, using her jaws to do so (Fig. 21).



Figure 22.

The calf would not hesitate to play close to her mother and auntie, splashing them with her fluke! (Fig. 22).

Conclusion

The behaviours described in this paper show some relationships that join the female dolphin to her calf.

They may be usual but some of them have to be emphasized (prenatal gymnastics or behaviour just before suckling for example).

Acknowledgements

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References

- Eastcott, A. Dickinson, T. (1987). Underwater Observations of the Suckling and Social Behaviour of a New-born Bottlenosed Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*). *Aq. Mamm.* **13**(2), 51-56.