

PLAY BEHAVIOUR WITH OBJECTS AND BUBBLES IN ORINOCO RIVER DOLPHINS (*Inia geoffrensis humboldtiana*)



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INTRODUCTION

Play behaviour is sometimes considered as not directly essential for the satisfaction of primary needs, such as other activities like swimming, food catching or inter-individual social interactions. However, play behaviour represents a crucial component of dolphins' life. Similarly to other cetaceans, Orinoco river dolphins play alone or in a group, often using different objects like brush, leaves or fish. Moreover, these animals are able to produce very different kinds of bubbles, with which they interact in a playful manner. This study intended to provide detailed quantification and dynamics of this phenomenon.

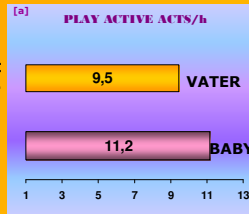
METHODS

An opportunity to investigate such behavioural aspects in this species - which occurs in turbid river waters - was provided by observation of two adult male (approx. 35 and 55 years old) hosted at Duisburg Zoo, Germany. Data were collected in May 2006 in a total of 120 focal observation sessions, lasting one hour each (60 hours/subject).

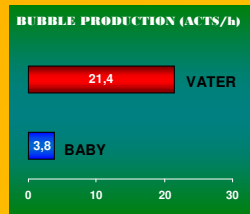
Surface:	900 m ²
Capacity:	650 m ²
Built in:	2005
VATER	
MALE	
55 YEARS	
BABY	
MALE	
30 YEARS	

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

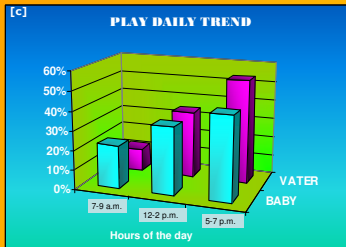
Playing with objects - expressed as rubbing, pushing, transporting or throwing objects - was a very common activity, expressed about ten times per hour, i.e. every five-six minutes [figure a].



At the opposite, while bubble production was a very frequent action [figure b], play behaviour connected to bubbles was absolutely rare (only three times in 120 hours of observation*).



*In all the observed situations, the dolphins directly acted towards the bubbles by biting them.



Both subjects spent a major portion of time involved in play behaviour in the afternoon [figure c], clearly preferring to interact with objects by transporting and balancing them on their long rostrum (49.8% of times).

Moreover, the two *Inia* showed "mixed category" behaviours, with playing performed simultaneously to other locomotory, postural or social behaviours. These activities primarily consisted in manipulating the object while rubbing the tank with different parts of the body, stay still in a horizontal or vertical position or swimming belly-to-belly with his conspecific [figure d].



Play behaviour in *Inia* is not only restricted to individuals of young age, but also adults play actively, for their own enjoyment or because, as in nature, playing is a vital part of learning and honing skills.

