

Mom and Pup Vocalization Activity



Objective

Students will learn how mom and pup seals and sea lions use distinct vocalizations to find each other amongst large groups.

Background

All seals, sea lions, and walruses (also called pinnipeds) use sound as their primary source of communication. Minutes after giving birth, the mother nuzzles her pup to distinguish its smell. She will also vocalize to her pup and the pup will vocalize back. This time period is very important as this will allow them to find one another among thousands of other animals on the beach in the future. When there are a lot of animals on a beach it can be very easy for the mother and pup to become separated. By knowing one another's unique scent and vocalization, it makes it easy for them to find each other. A few days after giving birth, the female will leave her pup to go feed in the ocean. When she returns, she will go back to the same place she left her pup and start vocalizing. Other pups will vocalize back to her, but she has to distinguish which pup is hers first by its sound, then by its scent.

Materials Needed

- Black film containers
- Objects to put inside the containers

Examples: Coins, marbles, gravel, paper clips, sand, wood, rubber bands, etc.

- Colored circular “dot” labels (2 colors, enough for every container)
Example: yellow labels=pups and blue labels=moms

Activity

1. Give each student two containers. Have them label each container with one of the colored circular labels, one yellow (pup) and one labeled blue (mom). Fill each set of containers with the same object or objects. For example, mix rubber bands with wood to make unique sounds with the objects. Each pair of containers should match one another.
2. Randomly pass out a container to each student (it should be an even number of “pups” and “moms”). Explain which color container is a pup and which is a mom. Have pups on one side of the room and moms on the other.
3. Students should start to shake their containers to produce sound. Now “moms” and “pups” must find each other by listening for the sound that matches theirs.
4. Once mom and pup find each other they sit down, and the teacher checks containers to make sure they are correct. If not, try again.
5. Once everyone has found their match, discuss how difficult it was. Discuss how hard it is for moms to find their pups when there are thousands of animals on the beach. This is why vocalizations are very important for pinnipeds.