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INTERSPECIFIC MATING BETWEEN BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN AND LONG FINNED PILOT WHALE

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INTRODUCTION

Interspecific mating in captive and free-ranging cetaceans is described in the literature. In some cases hybrids were born, of which some were even fertile. Nevertheless, these cases remain relatively rare. In this work, we describe two observations on which we witnessed clear sexual behaviour involving bottlenose dolphin *Tursiops truncatus* and long finned pilot whale *Globicephala melas*, two resident species in the Strait of Gibraltar.

MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

Our investigation took place in the Strait of Gibraltar, our boat departing from the harbour of Tarifa, Cadiz, Spain. We carried out our research from May to October 2004 and 2005. This project consisted in opportunistic sightings from the "Jackelin" whale watching boat. We selectively collected scientific data, e.g. Beaufort sea state, wind strength and direction, group composition and behaviour, etc.

RESULTS

Long finned pilot whales and bottlenose dolphins are the two species which are sighted most frequently, and 12'8 % of these sightings involved bottlenose dolphin and pilot whale either together or in close vicinity.

On two different occasions we witnessed clear sexual behaviour between bottlenose dolphins and pilot whales. The bottlenose dolphins involved were males, and the long finned pilot whales were females. Each mating involved several bottlenose dolphins and one single pilot whale. Both species displayed behaviours interpreted as relaxed and of apparent bilateral consent.

Matings took place in the margin of each respective group of pilot whales, with no separation of the female from its groups.

Violent interactions involving both species have also been recorded. In almost all cases, bottlenose dolphins are the disturbing element causing aggressive reactions. This results in interspecific teeth rakes which can be observed on many individuals of both species in the Strait of the Gibraltar. Two other cases of violent interactions were observed, in which two adult bottlenose dolphins violently separated a juvenile pilot whale from its group until an adult pilot whale came to its rescue.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

There is no clear explanation in the literature about the nature of the frequent association between both species.

From our observations in the Strait of Gibraltar, this association seems to be detrimental for the pilot whales.

Considering the known high sexual behaviour of cetaceans -in general, and especially of bottlenose dolphins- and the apparent bilateral consent, these two observations could be interpreted as sexual playing behaviour.

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Figure 1: Sequence of pictures showing the mating attempt between the bottlenose dolphins and the long-finned pilot whale; a) the bottlenose dolphin approaching the pilot whale, b) and c) contact; d) swimming together; e) mating.

