

Find Your Fur Seal Family

OBJECTIVE

Students will learn how a fur seal mother finds her pup in a crowded rookery.

TIME REQUIRED

10 minutes

BACKGROUND

Because female northern fur seals have to leave the rookery to feed at sea, they face the problem of finding their pup when they return. Females and pups reunite by calling to each other (the female recognizes the pup's call); when they get close enough, the female double-checks that the pup is hers by smelling it. Pups will answer several females' calls, but the female recognizes the pup's call and navigates across the rookery, calling to the pup all the way and listening for the pup's answering call.

MATERIALS

Slips of paper with pairs of capital and small letters.

PROCEDURE

Distribute the slips of paper to the students (make sure that you distribute pairs of letters, but only give one slip of paper to each student). Ask the students to keep their letters secret from one another.

First activity – early season

- When all students have received their slips of paper, tell them that if they have a CAPITAL letter, they are adult female seals. If they have a small letter, they are pups. They are to find the student with the letter that matches them, by calling out their letters.
- Pups may answer to several letters but females have to listen very carefully for their own letter and only respond to that one.
- When the pup and female get close enough that they can touch each other, they can show each other their letters.
- After all the students have matched up, collect the slips and discuss whether it was difficult for student pairs to find each other.

DISCUSSION

How do females find pups?

- ◆ Females and pups have unique vocalizations that they recognize. Once the female gets close enough to the pup, she uses smell to confirm its identity.

Second activity – late season

- The second round of this activity takes place after pup wads have formed (late July-early August). Distribute only the small letters for the pups, and have them gathered together in a small area.
- Choose two or three other students, give them a CAPITAL letter, and tell them to go to the pup wad and find their pup.
- All the pups are allowed to answer when a female calls, but the female has to listen very carefully for her own pup's call.
- This round can be repeated several times with different students playing the role of the females.

DISCUSSION

Discuss with the students whether it's easier or harder to find pups when they are in a pup wad. Why do pups respond to many females' calls but females only respond to one pup?

If a pup gets close enough to a female to fool her into thinking it is her pup, it can get more milk than if it only responds to its own mother.

EXTENSION

- Visit a rookery; look for mothers calling for their pups. Are the pups responding to the females?
- Watch a video of fur seals and pups.

ACTIVITY 3.4

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A	a	N	n
B	b	O	o
C	c	P	p
D	d	Q	q
E	e	R	r
F	f	S	s
G	g	T	t
H	h	U	u
I	i	V	v
J	j	W	w
K	k	X	x
L	l	Y	y
M	m	Z	z