

## Flipper is bisexual

# Homosexuality in marine mammals

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selected passages from Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 751 pp.

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### Bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)



Male Bottlenose Dolphins often form lifelong pair-bonds with each other. Adolescent and younger males typically live in all-male groups in which homosexual activity is common; within these groups, a male begins to develop a strong bond with a particular partner (usually of the same age) with whom he will spend the rest of his life. The two Dolphins become constant companions, often traveling widely; although sexual activity probably declines as they get older, it may continue to be a regular feature of such partnerships. Paired males sometimes take turns guarding or remaining vigilant while their partner

rests. They also defend their mates against predators such as sharks and protect them while they are healing from wounds inflicted during predators' attacks. Sometimes three males form a tightly bonded trio. On the death of his partner, a male may spend a long time searching for a new male companion—usually unsuccessfully, since most other males in the community are already paired and will not break their bonds. If, however, he can find another “widower” whose male partner has died, the two may become a couple...

The lives of male Bottlenose Dolphins are characterized by extensive bisexuality, combined with periods of exclusive homosexuality. As adolescents and young males, they have regular homosexual interactions in all-male groups, sometimes alternating with heterosexual activity. From age 10 onward, most male Dolphins form pair-bonds with another male, and because they do not usually father calves

until they are 20-25 years old, this can be an extended period—10-15 years—of principally same-sex interaction. Later, when they begin mating heterosexually, they still retain their primary male pair-bonds, and in some populations male pairs and trios cooperate in herding females or in interacting homosexually with Spotted Dolphins.

### **Orcas or Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*)**



Homosexual interactions are an integral and important part of male Orca social life. During the summer and fall—when resident pods join together to feast on the salmon runs—males of all ages often spend the afternoons in sessions of courtship, affectionate, and sexual behaviors with each other. A typical homosexual interaction begins when a male Killer Whale leaves his

matrilineal group to join a temporary male-only group; a session can last anywhere from a few minutes to more than two hours, with the average length being just over an hour. Usually only two Orcas participate at a time, although groups of three or four males are not uncommon, and even five participants at one time have been observed. The males roll around with each other at the surface, splashing and making frequent body contact as they rub, chase, and gently nudge one another. This is usually accompanied by acrobatic displays such as vigorous slapping of the water with the tail or flippers, lifting the head out of the water (*spyhopping*), arching the body while floating at the surface or just before a dive, and vocalizing in the air. Particular attention is paid by the males to each other's belly and genital region, and often they initiate a behavior known as *beak-genital orientation*, which is also seen in heterosexual courtship and mating sequences. Just below the surface of the water, one male swims underneath the other in an upside-down position, touching and nuzzling the other's genital area with his snout or "beak." The two males swim together in this position, maintaining beak-genital contact as the upper one surfaces to breathe; then they dive together, spiraling down into the depths in an elegant double-helix formation. As a variation on this sequence, sometimes one male will arch his tail flukes out of the water just before a dive, allowing the other male to rub his beak against his belly and genital area. When the pair resurfaces after three to five minutes, they repeat the sequence, but with the positions of the two males reversed. In fact, almost 90 percent of all homosexual behaviors are reciprocal, in that the males take turns touching or interacting with one another. During all of these interactions, the Orcas frequently display their erect penises, rolling at the surface or underwater to reveal the distinctive yard-long, pink organs...

Although males of all ages participate in homosexual activities, this behavior is most prevalent among “adolescent” Orcas (sexually mature individuals 12-25 years old). More than three-quarters of all sessions involve males who are more than five years apart in age, although age-mates also interact together (especially among adolescents). Occasionally, adult-only homosexual activity (i.e., between males 25 years and older) takes place. Some males have favorite partners with whom they interact year after year, and they may even develop a long-lasting “friendship” or pairing with one particular male. Other males seem to interact with a wide variety of different partners.

### Gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*)



Male homosexual interactions among Gray Whales occur frequently in the northern summering waters and during the northward migration. Sexual and affectionate activities occur close to the surface of the water in long sessions lasting anywhere from 30 minutes to more than an hour and a half. Often

more than two males are involved, sometimes as many as four or five. The whales begin by rolling around each other and onto their sides, with much splashing of water, flailing of fins and flukes at the surface, and occasional slapping of the surface and blowing; sometimes two males rise out of the water several feet in a throat-to-throat position. The whales rub their bellies together and position themselves so that their genital areas are in contact, and usually one or more has an arching, erect or semi-erect penis (which is a distinctive light pink in color and may be three to five feet in length and a foot in circumference at its base). Often two or more males intertwine their penises above the water surface, or one male may lay his erect penis on another male's belly or perhaps nudge the other's penis with his head. Female homosexual interactions may also occur.

Gray Whales also frequently form same-sex companionships (pairs and trios) that travel and feed together throughout the summer (without necessarily engaging in sexual activity with one another). They swim in an intimate side-by-side position, often with their side fins touching, and travel back and forth along the length of coastal inlets for hours at a time, apparently with no particular purpose other than to be together. Such companions also perform synchronized blowing and diving maneuvers, including feeding and *breaching* (an acrobatic leap two-thirds out of the water, landing with a dramatic splash on their sides or backs). Two whales also often roll over and under each other, rubbing bellies. Both short-term and long-term (recurring) pair- and trio-bonds occur: some last only for a few hours or days, with

the whales changing partners several times over the summer; other companionships endure from year to year.

### Harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina*)



Homosexual activity is also prevalent in male Harbor Seals in the form of *pairrolling*: two males embrace and mount each other in the water, continuously twisting and writhing about one another while maintaining full body contact. Rolling can become quite vigorous as the two animals spiral synchronously underwater and at the surface (often in a vertical position),

sometimes gently mouthing or biting each other's neck, chasing each other's flippers, yelping and snarling, blowing streams of bubbles underwater, or slapping the surface of the water. One male usually has an erection, and the bout of courtship rolling typically ends when he mounts the other male, grasping him from behind and maintaining this position for up to 3 minutes (sometimes sinking to the bottom in shallower waters). The two males may also take turns mounting each other.

### Sea otters (*Enhydra lutris*)



Male Sea Otters (*Enhydra lutris*) have been observed clasping and mounting other males (in the water) in the position usually seen during heterosexual matings. Male Sea Otters also sometimes mount and attempt to mate with Seals, including Harbor Seals and Northern Elephant Seals, and some of these interactions may be same-sex.

### West Indian Manatees (*Trichechus manatus*)



Male West Indian Manatees of all ages regularly engage in intense homosexual activities. In a typical

encounter, two males embrace, rub their genital openings against each other, and then unsheathe or erect their penises and rub them together, often to ejaculation. During a homosexual mating, the two males often tumble to the bottom, thrusting against each other and wallowing in the mud as they clasp each other tightly. A wide variety of positions are used, including embracing in head-to-tail and sideways positions, often with interlocking penises or flipper-penis contact. All of these are distinct from the position used for heterosexual copulation, in which the male typically swims underneath the female on his back and mates with her upside down. Lasting for up to two minutes, homosexual copulations are generally four to eight times longer than heterosexual ones. Before they engage in sexual activity, males often “kiss” each other by touching their muzzles at the surface of the water. In addition, several other types of affectionate and tactile activities are a part of homosexual interactions, including mouthing and caressing of each other’s body, nibbling or nuzzling of the genital region, and riding by one male on the back of the other (a behavior also seen in heterosexual interactions). Sometimes a male emits vocalizations indicating his pleasure during homosexual activity, variously described as high-pitched squeaks, chirp-squeaks, or snort-chirps. If, however, he is not interested in participating, he may emit a squealing sound, slapping his tail as he flees from the other male (just the way females do when trying to escape from unwanted advances of males).

Often several males participate at the same time in homosexual interactions: groups of up to four animals have been seen kissing, embracing each other in an interlocked “hug,” thrusting, and rubbing their penises against one another. These homosexual “orgies” can last for hours as new males arrive to join the group, subgroups form and re-form, and participants leave and return. Homosexual behavior is often part of a social activity known as *cavorting*, in which animals travel and splash about in groups, nuzzling, grabbing, chasing, rubbing, and rolling against one another. Cavorting groups can be mixed-sex or all-male.



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