

THE COMMERSON'S DOLPHIN (*CEPHALORHYNCHUS COMMERSONII*) - CAPTURE AND FIRST EXPERIENCES

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Initiated by an offer of an animal dealer at Bahia Blanca, we - our dolphin trainer Reinhold Reimann and the author - went to Southern Argentina in early November 1978, in order to be supplied with the Commerson's dolphin or Jacobita (*Cephalorhynchus commersonii*). This species has never before been exhibited in zoological gardens or Oceanaria.

After arrival in Fireland we very soon found out that the sender of the offer had neither the intention nor the ability to fulfil his promises. So we had to organize and execute capture and transport. We have had experience with White whales from the Canadian Arctic and with Amazon dolphins from Venezuela. However, in the present expedition we met with many additional problems, caused by the very large distances to be covered and, particularly, by the threat of a border war between Argentina and Chile, which led to a lot of understandable restrictions. For these reasons the operation, planned for 12 days only, became prolonged to 6 weeks. During the period of preparation we had useful support from another prospective dolphin customer who, attracted by the same offer, planned the import of 3 Jacobitas for a dutch zoological garden.

After a lot of impressive encounters with Killer whales (*Orcinus orca*), Southern elephant seals (*Mirounga leonina*), large groups of South American sea lions (*Otaria byronia*) and penguins, we had an exciting meeting with a group of Southern right whales (*Eubalaena glacialis australis*) for some days. The whales could be observed and photographed from the closest distance and could even be touched!

We saw our first Jacobitas in the bay of San Jorge, between Comodoro Rivadavia and Puerto deseado. The animals have a length of about 1,40 m and a weight between 30 and 40 kg. They are very swift and flexible swimmers and though they sometimes swam very near our boat, it was quite impossible to catch them with a sling, a net or by hand.

The capture trials were also hampered by the constant western winds of this region - the "pamperos" - which often worsen to dangerous storms. We only saw Jacobitas in small groups, 4 - 8 of them swimming closely together. Never more than 20 animals appeared in our field of vision at one time, usually there were less of them. The animals usually seemed to follow sardine shoals, during which they often came very near the coast, also entering bays and inlets.

After many failures we found a procedure to manoeuvre the animals into a larger net. Swimming and diving, we had to take the animals to the surface very quickly, which sometimes was an extremely difficult operation. In spite of this we had not a single loss. We captured 6 animals, 3 males and 3 females. In order to improve the ratio of sexes we exchanged one specimen immediately before the home flight, so that our stock consisted of 2, 4. In the tanks which we had constructed locally, the animals were not easily frightened; after about 4 days they started to look with interest at a hand, dived into the water, and soon they even did not mind being patted. We started force-feeding a short time later, beginning with squids, followed by fish of about 20 cm length, locally named „pejerrei”.

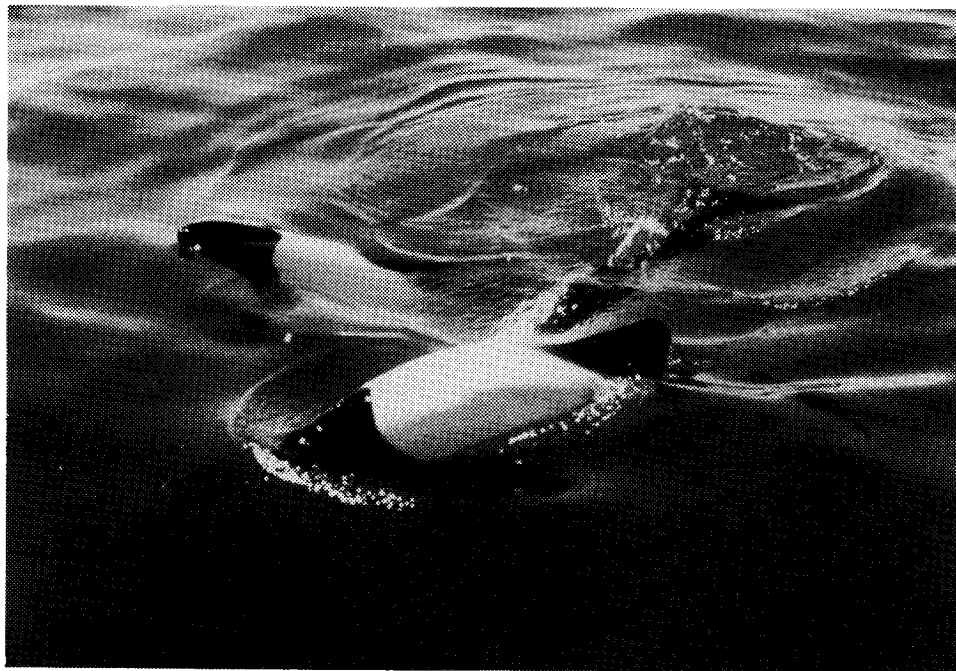


Fig. 1. Small flock of Jacobitas in the Bay San Jorge, 44° S.L. (photo: W. Gewalt)



Fig. 2. Jacobitas beside the capture boat. They are very fast swimmers. (Photo: W. Gewalt)

We finally started for the home flight on December 17th. Three animals were put on stretchers, the other ones on foam rubber. We had to conclude that foam rubber deserved preference, because of the very tender skin of the animals. An unforeseen break in the flight schedule forced us to place the animals in a private swimming pool in Buenos Aires for 18 hours, where they recuperated very well though the basin contained fresh water.

The continued flight gave no problems. Unfortunately, temperatures in Germany were very low, while it was surprisingly warm in South Patagonia with water temperatures of 13 - 16° C. The water of our White whale pool, which was meant to receive the animals, was only 6° C at that time. Therefore the animals were put into two quarantine pools in our sheltered and heated Delphinarium, where they swam around in a lively manner and took food immediately. The daily food intake was about 4 kg each, which seems a lot for a species no larger than the Harbour porpoise!

Ten to 12 days after arrival the first signs of mycosis of the skin were observed, which steadily increased. Though we consulted seven specialized veterinary surgeons, all mycologists and bacteriologists, and though we immediately started treatment with various fungicides and antibiotics, we did not succeed in stopping the disease. One by one we lost 4 of the animals. In post mortem dissection, infections with lung worms and pneumonia were diagnosed. Nevertheless, food intake had always been good.

Two animals survived and their condition finally improved. Unfortunately a further animal was killed by an accident. The remaining specimen has acclimatised well: today (February 1980), it has been in exhibition for 14 months and is in excellent condition. With its skin smooth like lacquer, this charming animal looks like a small *Orca*. The Jacobita has made good contact with our 3 White whales (*Delphinapterus leucas*) and goes through a splendid training programme together with these big white cetaceans. There are no problems with feeding and the water temperature of our White whale pool of 10° C in summer seems to be quite correct for the animal.

Evidently it is possible to keep this attractive species in a suitably cooled dolphinarium. This is in spite of the fact that another expedition, which took place almost at the same time as ours, did not succeed in bringing home any living specimen out of 10 or 11 animals captured. One year later (Jan. - Febr. 1980) we set out on a second expedition and took home some further Jacobitas. After a period of acclimatisation these animals will also be transferred to our White whale pool.

Recent literature about the species:

SPOTTE, S. „Recent literature”, C.W. RADCLIFFE and J.L. DUNN, 1979. Notes on Commerson's Dolphin (*Cephalorhynchus commersonii*) in Captivity. *Cetology* 35: 1-9.

According to "Marine Mammal Information", Dec. 1979, a study of the external characters of (*Cephalorhynchus commersonii*) is completed by N.P. GOODALL and I.S. CAMERON, Sarmiento 44, Ushuaia, Terra del Fuego, Argentina.

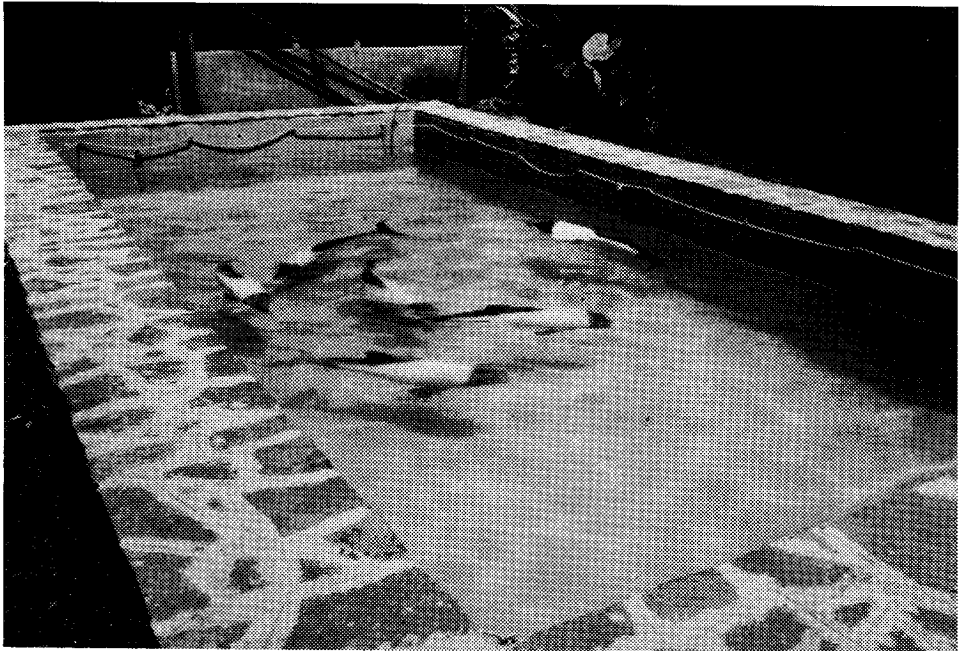


Fig. 3. The group of 6 animals in an emergency pool at Buenos Aires. Though the pool contained fresh water, the animals overcame this break of transport of about 48 hours in good condition. (Photo: W. Gewalt)

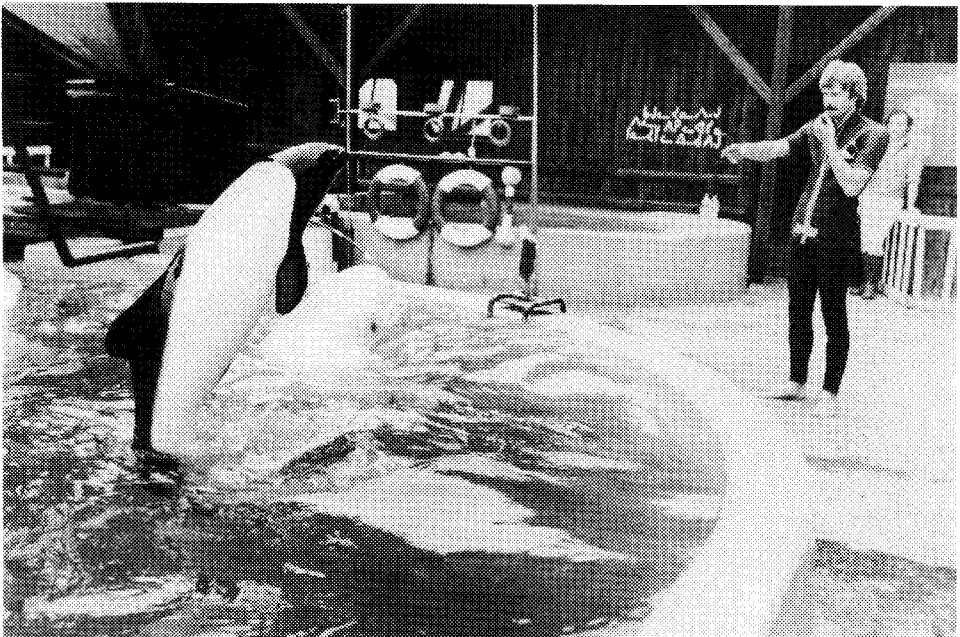


Fig. 4. First training in the White whale pool. (Photo: Zoo Duisburg, P. Schulz)