A TRAINER'S OBSERVATIONS OF THE BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF A CALIFORNIA SEALION

John Dineley, The Welsh Mountain Zoo, Colwyn Bay, North Wales, Great Britain

Introduction

At the Welsh Mountain Zoo, Colwyn Bay, North Wales, Great Britain we have three California sealions, two females, "Pru" (wild caught 1967) and "Pinny" (wild caught 1969) and a male called "Fred" (wild caught 1971).
The animals are kept in an exhibit 23 by 20 with a 12.5 by 6.5 kidney shaped pool in the middle. The pool is maintained on a fill empty system from the public fresh water supply. Next to the main exhibit is a small yard with a small pool and a weather proof den to which the animals have access at all times. However we have noticed that during very cold weather the animals spend most of their time in the main pool.
The animals are fed twice daily, winter and summer. During the summer their feeding time also includes a training display.
Their diet is a mixture of herring, mackerel, sprats and pouting. Pouting is a local caught fish, very much like whiting. Every day the animals are given a vitamin supplement in their first fish of the day. The supplement is 100 mg vitamin B1, 3 Mazuri multi-vitamin tablets for fish eating animals and a one gram tablet of common salt.

The birth, May 1979

We did not have any idea the female "Pru" was pregnant.
The preceding winter had been very cold, with sometimes ice two inches thick on the pool. We kept the animals well fed during this time to ensure their good health. Ofcourse, in the following spring the animals were all very fat. Also, our male "Fred" was at the time a small animal and although sex play in the water between "Fred" and "Pru" had been seen the summer before, we thought he may not be able to father an off-spring.
On the 27th May 1979 "Pru" was seen to be resting a lot of the time on the pool side, she had been eating and performing well, if not a little slow, which we thought could be due to her weight.
The next day, the 28th May, she ate and performed at her morning feed. But at 2.30 pm we noticed she had gone into the sealion den and was laying down. At 3.00 pm the other two sealions were fed as normal and "Pru" was left in the den. By this time we had noticed she was in discomfort and did not seem to be able to relax herself as if she was uncomfortable in what ever position she lay. At 3.40 pm she gave birth to a male pup, the birth was very quick, over in less than a minute, the pup being born in the head first position.
As soon as the pup was free "Pru" turned around, picked up the pup and dropped it at her head. She showed from the very beginning a great maternal interest in the pup. She began to muzzle it and also call to it, to which the pup called back. These exchanges, between mother and pup carried on for many weeks.
The after-birth was expelled soon after the birth and was found to weigh about half a kg. "Pru" began to try and stimulate the pup to suckle by rubbing her nose against the pup's and pushing him in the general area of her nipples. This behaviour was seen on many occasions for weeks after the birth.
The following day, the 29th May, "Salty", as the pup was called, had been seen to suckle at 8.30 am, also at 2.45 in the afternoon and for a full five minutes at 8.15 that evening. We have observed that the pup would suckle for very long periods in the evenings.

"Pru" was quite good with people she knew at this time and would allow us to enter the pen with her, as long as we did not take liberties with the pup.

June 1979

On June 1st, after three days in the yard, "Pru" climbed the fence into the main exhibit. We then emptied down the pool and let the pup out to join her. "Pru" had always been the dominante animal with the sealion group and kept the other animals away from the pup. We had stopped the training display, but still fed all the animals on their training stands to stop fights and ensure that all animals got a fair share of food. During feeds the pup would take the chance to explore the enclosure and began to paddle in the small amount of water left in the bottom of the pool.
By the 13th June the pup was seen to be able to swim and the pool was returned to its normal depth.

July 1979

By the beginning of July the pup had gained complete confidence in water and on land. "Pru" continued to be the good mother we thought she would be.

Weaning

"Salty" began to show an interest in fish at the beginning of November. He was given from time to time a sprat to play with. On the 7th November it was thought he had eaten a sprat head. On the 16th November "Salty" ate three sprats; this was at the age of 24 weeks and two days. From this point on he made steady progress on sprats. By the beginning of December "Salty" was eating about 3/4 kg of sprats aday.
To his diet we added a vitamin supplement of 1 Mazuri multi-vitamin tablet (Table 1), 1 Gevral multi-vitamin tablet, 100 mg B1 and 500 mg salt tablet.
"Salty" from time to time still suckled from "Pru" but this became less frequent.
"Salty" was last seen to suckle from his mother on the 3rd February 1980; by this time however, we are unsure if "Pru" had any milk to offer him.
"Salty" was eating at this time 1 kg of sprats per day and was doing well.
In Januari a small training seat was placed in the exhibit for him to use as he had begun to sleep and play on the adults training stands.
He began to use it very quickly and an effort to begin a little training with him began in March. He was quite easy to handle and by his first birthday he climbs up onto your leg on command, shakes flipper, waves, claps, catches rings around his neck and has begun to balance a ball and do a flipper-stand.

Conclusion

Our success with "Salty" has been due, we feel, to having a good sealion mother in "Pru". The ease in weaning the young pup was helped by feeding the adults on the training stands and allowing the pup to experiment with fish unhindered. We look forward to future pups from "Pru" and our other female sealion in the years to come.

Table 1

Mazuri Fish Eater Tablets, manufactured by B.P. Nutritional Products, Stephield, Witham, Essex, Gr. Britain.
Each tablet contains:

Vitamin A	5000 i.u.
Vitamin D3	500 i.u.
Vitamin E	125 i.u.
Vitamin B2	1 mg
Vitamin K	5 mg
Nicotinic Acid	5 mg
Pantothenic Acid	5 mg
Folic Acid	0.125 mg
Vitamin B1	50 mg
Vitamin B6	1.25 mg
Biotin	0.25 mg
Vitamin C	50 mg
Vitamin B12	1 mg

Table 2

Gevral capsules, vitamin/mineral nutritional supplement, manufactured by Lederle (Cynamid Ltd), England.
Each capsule contains:

Vitamin A	5000 i.u.
Vitamin 1 as calcif + yeast	500 i.u.
Vitamin B1	5 mg
Vitamin B2	5 mg
Vitamin B6	0.5 mg
Vitamin B12	1.0 mg
Vitamin C	50 mg
Vitamin E	10 i.u.
Niacinamide	15 mg
Potassium as Pol. sulphate	5 mg
Iodine as KI	0.1 mg
Copper as Cupro oxide	0.1 mg
Magnesium Mg dioxide	1.0 mg
Zinc as Z O	0.5 mg
Choline	50 mg
Lysine	2.5 mg
Calcium Pantothenate	5 mg
Calcium as dibasic Caphosphate	145 mg
Phosphor as dibasic Caphosphate	110 mg
Elementol iron as ferous fumarate	10 mg
Magnesium as Mg oxide	1.0 mg