

Name: _____ Class: _____

Why Dolphins Make Us Nervous

By Robert Krulwich
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Dolphins' brains allow them to perform functions that are normally associated with human intelligence. In this informational text, Robert Krulwich explores how humans' intelligence compares to dolphins' intelligence. As you read, take notes on how humans react to and interpret dolphins' intelligence.

- [1] What is it about dolphins? They have very, very big brains, and that makes we humans, whose brains are nothing to sniff at, nervous. We don't know what to make of them.

The latest example: On May 17 in India, the Ministry of Environment and Forests issued an order to all Indian states banning dolphin amusement parks. No leaping out of pools to catch balls, no jumping through hoops. Forcing dolphins to entertain humans, the ministry said, was morally unacceptable.

"Cetaceans [dolphins, whales and porpoises] in general are highly intelligent and sensitive," the Ministry said, "and various scientists who have researched dolphin behavior have suggested that [they have] unusually high intelligence... compared to other animals."

This means, the Indian ministry went on: "that dolphins should be seen as 'non-human persons' and as such should have their own specific rights." "Non-human persons" — what a pregnant¹ phrase! People-like, but not like people.



"NMMP dolphin with locator" by U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Brien Aho. is in the public domain.

- [5] India's putting dolphins (and the other cetaceans) into a new legal category that classifies them as beings nearer to ourselves, with an emotional life that, if we could talk to them, or listen in to whatever they're saying, we might find familiar. I'm thinking of the famous *New Yorker* cartoon that shows two dolphins swimming side-by-side, where one of them says to another, "If I could do only one thing before I died, it would be to swim with a middle-aged couple from Connecticut." (Which you can see here.)²

1. full of meaning; significant

2. In the original blog post, this was a link to a satirical cartoon published in the *New Yorker* that Krulwich described.

You may giggle, but the joke hurts. Big-brained animals almost certainly wouldn't want to spend years lugging polyester-skinned mammals across shallow swimming pools six days a week, or juggling colorful balls with their rostrums (noses). Their brains suggest they've got better things to do. What, we're not sure. All we know is, being a dolphin has to be a very different from being a person, an experience we can only guess at.

And yet, because of those brains, it's hard not to slip into thinking of them as if they were variants³ of us. This happened to me, instantly, last year, when I read that the U.S. Navy had decided to "retire" a group of mine-detecting dolphins, replacing them with robots.

Twenty-four dolphins, after years of service, were being "reassigned," the story said, so that sea drones, or unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs, in Navy parlance)⁴ could take their place. The Navy had its reasons. The robots didn't need constant feeding, medical attention, cages and rest. They didn't need seven years of training. Robots could do the job on day one for less — much less. So the dolphins got sacked.⁵

And I thought, *what?* And, instantly, each of those dolphins became a Norma Rae,⁶ fists (fins?) clenched, crying "UNFAIR!" After giving their whole careers to the Navy, sniffing for underwater mines to protect our ships and harbors, this is the thanks they get? That, of course, was *my* mind shouting; what the dolphins were thinking, if they even noticed the change, is anybody's guess.

[10] Which is the puzzle. The deep puzzle.

I can understand why an animal that looks like us, a gorilla or an orangutan, with their familiar faces and gestures would get our attention and respect. But dolphins don't blink like we do, don't gaze thoughtfully or frown (ever). Their faces are like masks, and yet, because an organ hidden in their heads, because their brain resembles ours in size, we ignore their different shape, their different habitat, their alien-ness, and we embrace them as "non-human persons."

To be fair, their brains *are* big. Lori Marino, a dolphin expert at Emory University, told Discovery News that dolphin brains are about "five times larger for their body size when compared to another animal of similar size," meaning their brains are almost as disproportionately large as ours. We are seven times the norm. "Not a huge difference," she says.

The part of the brain dedicated to abstract thinking, the neocortex, in a dolphin brain is "more highly convoluted⁷ than our own," she said, and it is her opinion that dolphins are capable of complex, subtle thinking. You don't have a brain like that for no reason.

3. **Variant (noun):** something that is slightly different from other similar things

4. a particular way of speaking or using words

5. fired from a job

6. a reference to the 1979 American drama film about a factory worker who becomes involved in labor union activities

7. "Convoluted" in this case means complexly folded and refers to the ridges in the brain. These ridges, or convolutions, increase the brain's surface area and give the brain's neurons a greater capacity to store and process information.

We Haven't Cracked The Code

So what's the reason? Dolphin scientists assume these animals are very social and communicate constantly, and the brains they have are designed to manage all that inter-dolphin messaging. As to what they're talking about — we haven't cracked the code. But because we, the other big brained species, have used our brains to organize armies, to re-design landscapes, to invade the sky, to dominate all the continents and to wipe out almost all the other large animals, we may have the faint suspicion that if they choose, dolphins could do likewise. It's a possibility that we can't completely dismiss. We just don't know.

- [15] Well — that's not right. One of us knows. The late and very lamented⁸ British writer, satirist, and wildlife explorer Doug Adams, in *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*,⁹ explained that “on the planet Earth, man had always assumed that he was more intelligent than dolphins because he had achieved so much — the wheel, New York, wars and so on — whilst all the dolphins had ever done was muck about in the water having a good time. But conversely,¹⁰ the dolphins had always believed that they were far more intelligent than man — for precisely the same reasons.”

Maybe that's why they fascinate us. What if, after tens of thousands of years conquering and murdering and dominating, it turns out that leaping, diving and mucking around in the water is what the real smarties do?

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8. In this content, lamented means mourned after death.
9. a comedy science fiction series about the last surviving man following the destruction of the planet Earth
10. opposite or contrary

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies Krulwich's main claim in the text?
 - A. Even though the minds of dolphins are mysterious, we should consider the possibility that they are as intelligent as humans.
 - B. No matter how intelligent or unintelligent an animal is, they should not be used for the entertainment of humans.
 - C. Dolphins represent the standard of intelligence that animals should reach to be considered emotionally similar to humans.
 - D. Until people find a way to communicate with dolphins, they won't be able to confirm if dolphins' intelligence is similar to humans' intelligence.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "No leaping out of pools to catch balls, no jumping through hoops. Forcing dolphins to entertain humans, the ministry said, was morally unacceptable." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "Big-brained animals almost certainly wouldn't want to spend years lugging polyester-skinned mammals across shallow swimming pools six days a week," (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "dolphin brains are about five times larger for their body size when compared to another animal of similar size," (Paragraph 12)
 - D. "to dominate all the continents and to wipe out almost all the other large animals, we may have the faint suspicion that if they choose, dolphins could do likewise." (Paragraph 14)

3. PART A: Which statement best describes the connection the author draws between animals' intelligence and how humans treat them?
 - A. Animals who are highly intelligent are considered better suited for tasks often completed by humans.
 - B. Animals may be emotionally intelligent, but can't comprehend the experiences of captivity or entertainment.
 - C. Animals who have emotional intelligence are considered too similar to humans to participate in degrading tasks.
 - D. Animals with high intelligence enjoy the challenge of completing tasks assigned to them in captivity.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "the Ministry said, 'and various scientists who have researched dolphin behavior have suggested that [they have] unusually high intelligence... compared to other animals.'" (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "Big-brained animals almost certainly wouldn't want to spend years lugging polyester-skinned mammals across shallow swimming pools six days a week," (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "Twenty-four dolphins, after years of service, were being 'reassigned,' the story said, so that sea drones, or unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs, in Navy parlance) could take their place." (Paragraph 8)
 - D. "That, of course, was my mind shouting; what the dolphins were thinking, if they even noticed the change, is anybody's guess." (Paragraph 9)

5. What evidence from the text supports the author's claim about the intelligence of dolphins? Evaluate whether this evidence is sufficient to support the author's claims.
