

Pitching a Fit

LEFT: *Rio tosses her duck decoy in frustration at making a mistake.*

RIGHT: *Rio and decoy in a calmer moment*

Even when captive animals are some distance away from visitors or caretakers, they're quite capable of expressing their anger, peevishness, or resentment at them. This can be done in a variety of ways, depending on the species and environmental circumstances, and it can include hurling or throwing whatever is handy, spitting water or partially (or even fully) digested food, or splashing water at the intended targets (which have sometimes included me).

I've observed such events many times in my career, and the animals I'm most familiar with who engage in such mischief are bottlenose dolphins, harbor seals, California sea lions, and common chimpanzees. In the late 1960s, I was being shown some female harbor seals who were kept in a pool located in a small house. My host, Michael Biggs, told me to be careful as we opened the door because I could get soaking wet. Sure enough, as we tried to enter the laboratory, one of the harbor seals began splashing torrents of water over the sides of the pool, spraying it so far that all we could do was duck and flee before we got drenched. My understanding from Michael was that he had to endure this every time he made his observations and took blood samples from his animals. In other words, his animals would allow their blood to be drawn, but only if they could soak him down first.

One of my most vivid memories of hurling behavior as an aggressive act was one that took place at Kewalo Basin in Hawaii during research on teaching dolphins an artificial language. The female dolphin Ake had just been given a series of gestural signals by a young intern. The cues were produced at the side of the pool, and when Ake didn't respond correctly, she was given negative feedback. A moment later, the dolphin grabbed a large plastic pipe floating on the water's surface and flung it unerringly at the poor, unsuspecting intern. The pipe missed the young lady's head by inches, and all the students, volunteers, and researchers around the pool gasped.

Very similar incidents have occurred with California sea lions who were being given visual instructions in both artificial language and matching-to-sample, a task requiring an animal to fetch an object identical to one being displayed. In each case an object was flung at the signaler following negative feedback because the complete task had not been correctly carried out by the sea lion. For example, Rio, one of our sea lions at Long Marine Lab, was given an instruction to retrieve the objects in a pool following an incorrect response in a matching-to-sample task. She retrieved one of the objects, a duck decoy painted black, but instead of carrying it to the side of the pool and placing it at



the signaler's feet, as she'd been trained to do, she grabbed the duck decoy's head in her mouth and hurled the heavy object directly at the signaler. This behavior occurred many times with an assortment of objects and always followed an incorrect response.

The clearest example I ever saw of an animal getting revenge on one of its caretakers goes back to my pre- and post-doctoral days at the Yerkes Laboratory of Primate Biology in Orange Park, Florida. It was a cold, misty December morning, and I'd noticed my friend and colleague Larry Sharp standing in front of a young male chimpanzee, Franz, who was in one of the large end cages in a row of cages. Franz, one of several common chimpanzees at Yerkes, was known to be a feces thrower; that is, he would scoop up excrement and throw it underhand as he charged his intended victim.

The fecal material usually would hit the cage wire and shatter like a shotgun blast.

Larry had been one of Franz's favorite targets, but that morning Larry noticed that the fecal material had been cleaned up and there was none available for Franz to throw. Consequently, he went to the front of the cage and began teasing Franz, saying, "You've got no fecal material today, and you can't get me—na na na naaaaa-na!" Franz was hanging on the fence, weaving back and forth, staring at Larry throughout the taunting. When Larry finished, Franz regurgitated partially digested cookies that he had been fed only a few minutes earlier. The awful-smelling stuff sprayed all over Larry and Franz started running around the cage doing a victory dance. He'd gotten his revenge on Larry Sharp.