

A Children's Pool for All Children

Those of us who have watched with delight and even awe the newborn seal pups and their mothers in La Jolla, are truly saddened to hear of the judge's decision to let the city devise a plan to destroy this natural nursery. Casa Beach is one of the rare rookeries along the Southern California coastline. There are so few places left where we can observe wild animals – to learn first-hand about mothering from other mammals and their new generations. The question now seems to be ethical: Does this so-called Children's Pool really belong only to our species? One of the first lessons we teach our children is to share. Can't we as adults model this extended family ideal by allowing this natural habitat to be a place of safety and kinship for all life?

Seals are our mammal cousins. Like humans, they give birth on land, nurse their young on rich milk fat, and the mother-pup bond is extremely close. In La Jolla there is a miracle almost every morning during pup season: A silver seal gives birth to a fuzzy pup. Immediately she turns with tender concern to nurse and snuggle with her newborn. The tiny pup, only two foot long, is covered with

placenta and still wrinkled from the womb. Sea gulls and sometimes eagles swoop down for the afterbirth.

After a half hour or so, the mother seal nudges her pup toward the surf and her first swimming lesson. At first, the pup is afraid of the waves that are so much larger and noisier than those that first rocked her inside the womb. But very gently, the mother seal coaxes her pup into the surf, allowing the newborn to float on her back, much the way humans teach their babies to swim – always keeping contact as they let the waves carry them in and out. Tentatively, the pup takes a first plunge into the water alone, sinks, and then bobs back up – with the mother right there. It could be any mother, any species – the teaching is the same.

Soon the mother must leave her vulnerable pup awhile on land to go fishing. In a nursery like Casa Beach, the pup is protected by the community of other seals until her mother returns to nurse. This healthy seal society is the natural wonder that we are allowed to observe during pup season. It's Animal Planet – but live in La Jolla. In the early morning, Casa Beach is very quiet, with only the soft barking and echoing call of mother seals. Toppled over one another, the mothers and pups bask as the sun warms their speckled fur. Sometimes it

seems as if the seals are singing with their low, melodic moan. Scientists have shown that seals, like many other mammals, actually dream in R.E.M. sleep. Drifting in kelp forests or the shallow waters off La Jolla, seal pups and mothers dream and float while sleeping. They rise up to breathe.

And yet a city of humans is awakening from dreams to go down to the beach. Will we be good neighbors to this nursery? Will we be respectful of the wildlife resting alongside us, so trustingly? Most wild animals hide from humans for fear. Here in La Jolla there is an interspecies trust that has existed since the 1880s when public record documents that seals used this beach as a birthplace, a homeland.

This inspiring interspecies treaty is now about to be broken. If this rookery is removed we know what the seals lose: shelter, rest, community, safety. But what do we humans lose? We lose the opportunity to teach our children that other species are our planet-mates and deserve a home, too. We lose the chance to show our kids a real-life Animal Planet not just on the tube but right here in our backyards.

Think of Casa Beach as a cross-cultural exchange of good will between species. What better lesson than to teach our children to swim in a diverse world

-- to generously share our land and to fit into other's lives? Casa Beach is a children's pool for the very young of all species. It will be a lonely beach, with only us left on it.~

Copyright, Brenda Peterson, all rights reserved.

Brenda Peterson is a National Geographic author and the co-author of *PUPS ON THE BEACH*, a children's book forthcoming from Henry Holt for Young Readers in 2010.