

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS OF JUVENILE SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALES OFF PENÍNSULA VALDÉS, ARGENTINA

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Juvenile whales represent a large proportion of all whales but we know little about their behavior and social interactions and how they develop social skills. I studied the behavior of juvenile southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*) off Península Valdés during the nursing season between 1997 and 2001. In 1,115 hourly scans, 1,651 juveniles represented 16% of 10,331 whales sighted (including resightings). Juveniles spent 55% of the time socializing and they socialized significantly more with other juveniles (75.4% of socializing time) than with adults (13.4%), mother-calf pairs (10.1%) or whales of indeterminate age/sex (1.1%). Thirty-one females and 44 males were observed for 164h during 129 focal animal samples. The sexes did not differ in the time spent resting, travelling or in surface activity. However, females spent significantly more time belly up than males, and ended encounters more frequently by turning away from other whales. Juvenile females were more passive during interactions with juvenile and adult males than during interactions with juvenile and adult females. Both sexes interacted with mother-calf pairs, but juvenile females spent significantly more time interacting with calves than males. Juvenile right whales may use the Península Valdés nursery ground as a place to socialize, and to establish relationships with age peers that may be important during their adult lives. Sex differences in social interactions that are part of adult whale behavior begin to be established during the juvenile stage.

Key words: right whale, juveniles, social behavior, Argentina

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