



Dolphins such as this mother and infant use a diverse repertoire of whistles to communicate, but scientists disagree about whether they use names.

Do dolphins have names?

Perhaps it's their 'smiling' face, large eyes, or athletic prowess? Whatever the reason, dolphins are perceived as special animals with almost-human characteristics.

There is no doubting the intelligence of dolphins and they communicate by a variety of calls or whistles, but do they use distinctive 'signature whistles' or names?

Several scientists working with bottlenose dolphins have argued that indeed they do.

They define signature whistles as an individually distinctive, predominant whistle type, accounting for 70–95% of whistles produced by each individual. These categorically different whistle 'contours' have been thought to act as names or labels.

It's an appealing idea, but according to a study by Dr Brenda McCowan, of the University of California at Davis, and Dr Diana Reiss, of the New York Aquarium, the existence of signature whistles in bottlenose dolphins is a fallacy.

McCowan and Reiss conducted a study on three groups of captive dolphins, some born in the wild and some in captivity, that replicated the approach and methods used by other scientists who first described distinctive signature whistles in dolphins.

They came to a different conclusion though, supporting the more sceptical views of some other researchers that dolphins don't actually use names or signature whistles, but rather a shared contact call.

This is a predominant vocalisation, occurring in species or groups ranging from birds to monkeys, that maintains group contact or cohesion.

McCowan and Reiss reported that 10 of the 12 dolphins they studied shared a whistle type that was their predominant call and they identified 14 subtle variations that could be associated with individual identity.

They say these variations within a whistle type are best regarded as signature information: individual differences in 'voice' that allow

individuals or groups to recognise each other, rather than signature whistles as such. This is common among non-human animals.

So, until more concrete proof is forthcoming, it's probably best to conclude that dolphins do not have special nicknames.

Nonetheless, dolphins certainly have an impressive and diverse repertoire of calls. The researchers have shown that these actually change during development and that young dolphins learn the repertoire in much the same way that humans learn language. Infant dolphins even 'babble' sequences of whistles that eventually become more organised as adulthood approaches.

More about dolphin 'whistles'

McCowan B and Reiss D (2001) The fallacy of 'signature whistles' in bottlenose dolphins: a comparative perspective of 'signature information' in animal vocalisations. *Animal Behaviour*, 62: 1151–1162.

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