

Too Cute for their Own Good

Why do we feel the urge to squeeze the living hell out of cute, baby animals?

Caroline Carter



On February 18th, 2016 a baby dolphin was killed crowd surfing in Argentina. Lazily weaving between swimmers in the rolling waves, the dolphin was plucked from the water and carried onto shore. Beachgoers nearby swarmed around the creature, eager to see what was going on. From afar, the mob of smiling faces lit up by screens of iPhones taking selfies looked like a celebration of sorts. Everyone was shouting excitedly, hoping for an opportunity to hold the animal. But to the baby La Plata dolphin, it was torture. Sandy fingers grabbed at the dolphin's drying skin as it was pulled in every direction, trying not to let their slimy, sunscreened hands drop the beautiful creature.

And once everyone was satisfied with their selfies, the dolphin was left to die on the beach. No one even had the common sense to return it to the ocean.

Word spread like wildfire. After hearing that La Plata dolphins were on the endangered species list, there was talk of filing criminal charges against those who partook in what could aptly be described as a "hate crime." There certainly was enough visual evidence to do so given

the number of Facebook and Instagram selfies posted. Even though it was only one animal life that was lost that day, it was a hotter topic than most other tragedies on the news.

“Selfie-Crazed Beachgoers Kill Rare Dolphin,” “This Dolphin Died Because Beachgoers Wanted a Selfie,” “Baby Dolphin Killed as Tourists Yank It Out of the Ocean to Take a Selfie,” “Baby Dolphin Killed for Selfies?! WTF!!! *reaction + actual videos*.” Headlines appeared in newspapers and social media blew up with pictures of the incident. YouTube videos popped up on the internet and quickly accumulated millions of views. Disgusted with the mass display of ignorance, people were not afraid to show their bias and take a stand for how they felt.

Everyone was enraged. Hell, I was too.

Driving along the winding roads on the Maine coast, it was easy to miss the Marine Mammals of Maine’s triage center. In fact, I drove right past it at first, confusing the long and barnlike building tucked away in the trees for just another farm. When I pulled into the parking lot, the place seemed nearly abandoned, with only two trucks parked neatly next to each other on the gravel next to the building. Its autumn neighbors were horses lazily grazing the thin, pale green grass on next-door farms. The building itself was a quiet pale blue color speckled with a few windows and doors.

The metal bolts on the hinges of the door whined as I turned the handle and pushed it open. Stepping inside, I was greeted by a tan dog who excitedly leaped into my arms before leading me upstairs. If it was not for the muffled conversation of two women emanating from the second floor, you would have assumed the dog was living in solitude in the building. I walked into a large room where two women sat amid several empty chairs around a large, round table. It was difficult to imagine the place in its busy summer months with people hustling around one another.

One of the women shook my hand and introduced herself as Dominique, the assistant stranding coordinator of the non-profit organization. In a sentence, the Marine Mammals of Maine (MMoME) organization saves stranded seal pups. They respond to calls along close to 3000 miles of Maine coastline from Kittery to Rockland and can host up to 10 seals at the triage center for four days of intensive care. After this period of emergency care, the seals must be transported to either the National Marine Life Center in Buzzard’s Bay, Massachusetts or the Mystic Aquarium in Connecticut. With a permanent staff consisting of only Dominique and one

other woman, they “really rely on the volunteers,” Dominique said. The organization takes on about six interns and 90 volunteers in the summer months when their hotline is buzzing nonstop.

Unfortunately for seals, pupping season coincides with the heaviest tourism of the year: end of May through July. Seals typically leave their pups on the beach when they venture out into the water to find food for themselves and their offspring. But just as soon as mom flops into the water in the morning, tourists are beginning to unfold their beach chairs and break out their frisbees, eager to enjoy a day at the beach. Overcrowding makes it challenging for seals to find their pups amid the beachgoers, but worse, many tourists do not respect their distance from seal pups on the beach and instead appoint themselves as babysitters. Infatuated by the big brown eyes of a chubby seal, they approach the animal, selfie stick in hand. Misinformed tourists take it upon themselves to care for the pup, assuming that it has been abandoned since the mom is nowhere in sight. This misunderstanding can be fatal to the animal, as human interference can cause intense physical and emotional stress on the pup.

Closing my eyes, I tried to visualize the facility in early June. I imagined the empty cages filled with barking seals, phones ringing around the clock, volunteers bustling about providing basic care to the patients, and cars pulling in and out of the parking lot with dog kennels braced to hold seal pups. “It was go, go, go all the time and don’t even think about it,” said Bri, an intern during the summer 2016 season. After graduating from University of New Hampshire on May 25th, she had only one day of rest before starting her job on Memorial Day weekend, which just happened to be the busiest weekend of the summer at MMoME.

“I think I worked 90 hours in the first ten days there” she said, “I had never touched a seal before, but within twenty minutes of walking in I was giving a seal a bath and by the end of the day I was teaching volunteers how to do the same.” Just as Bri was stepping into the triage center for the first time, convoys of New England families were driving their SUVs up to Maine coastal towns, eager to spend the weekend on the beach with a book in one hand and a Bud Light in the other. “The problem is seals have no regard for holidays, weekends, or your sleeping hours for that matter, so you get calls around the clock,” said Bri.

Ring Ring Ring

“Hello, this is the Marine Mammals of Maine association.”

“Hello, yes! I want to report a couple of stranded seals. They looked at me and we had a moment. I think they know me and need help.”

“Where are you?”

“At a beach near Sprucehead, follow the main road past the school and then take a right at the rock after the third large tree. When you get to the gate just jiggle it and force it open. I’m on the beach.”

“Okay we are sending someone, sit tight.”

It was the first time any of the three interns, including Bri, were sent out on a response mission. After a three-hour drive of makeshift directions and then losing cell service and the comfort of google maps, they were able to find the seals relatively quickly. Once on scene, they had to walk the fine line of figuring out how exactly to save the stranded pup while also seeming like experts to the man who made the call. “We were newbies trying our best to keep our cool,” Bri said.

They found the pups resting next to each other on a flat rock. The waves lazily lapped in and out, kissing the bellies of the evidently underweight and malnourished seals. Recognizing the underlying urgency of the impending high tide, the interns started to act fast. After initially lunging at Bri and the other interns, the seals thankfully calmed down once the interns threw a towel over their furry heads. Scooping them up off the sand, they carefully set them into the dog crates in the back of the trucks and began the drive back to the triage center before Bri’s phone buzzed again.

Ring Ring Ring

“Hey Bri, this is Dominique. We just got another call about a seal in Sprucehead, you guys should go check it out since you are already up there.”

Going on their twelfth hour of work, Bri and the others stopped in a parking lot to reposition the seals to facilitate better monitoring before the next mission. It was going to be a while before any of the pups or interns were headed back on the three-hour drive to Harpswell. They sped off to the private beach, chasing the last few minutes of daylight. Once they were off

the main road, Bri and the other interns wound up lost on a private road through the woods, this time “in the middle of nowhere, and I mean *really* in the middle of nowhere,” said Bri.

Several missed turns later, they parked the car by the house of the man who called in the seal and briskly walked down a steep hill onto the private beach in the hazy twilight. “You deal with a lot of really absurd people sometimes,” said Bri. The man had a “crazy vibe. He didn’t seem to care as much about the seal as trying to get us to join him in his house for Pepsi and other treats, whatever that meant.” The three interns struggled to relax with this strange man breathing down their necks, but there was something keeping them at the scene: a malnourished, tiny seal with an infected wound above her eye. “Once you get to the response and you see the animal, you forget how tired you are and remember why you are doing this,” said Bri. The interns tenderly picked up the seal, making sure not to aggravate her injury before placing her into the crate, neatly beside the other two pups.

Sitting in the bed of the truck with the two dog kennel sized crates, Bri spent her ride back to MMoME staring deeply into the soft, brown eyes of the seals. Once back in Harpswell, they gave basic care to the seals before the clock struck midnight. Bri spent the night at the triage center in an attempt to maximize sleep before starting the next day five short hours later.



“I did not expect to fall in love with the seals so quickly; it’s hard not to feel a personal connection with them” said Bri when I asked what drew her to such a taxing job of driving long hours, working overtime, and sleeping alone in a dark barn. “There was this one seal, #66, who was just so lethargic and honestly at death’s door. Within a 24-hour period of getting hydration and formula, he was a completely different seal. He was the comeback kid, the underdog. He, in particular, was special to me,” said Bri. There seems to be a commonality among everyone who interacts with a seal on a beach, whether it is the human who ignorantly puts the seal under immense stress by attempting to care for it, the person who calls MMoME’s hotline, or the responder. Everyone wants to save the baby seal.

Dr. Oriana Aragon specializes in the psychology of adorable baby features, not unlike those you see in seal pups. Interestingly some of Dr. Aragon’s most compelling work did not originate from the typical beginnings of psychology research, characteristic of countless hours of thoughtfully pouring over literature. One late night in 2011, she remembered mindlessly clicking through TV channels and stopping on NBC to watch the CONAN show. Conan O’Brien was interviewing an actress, and they were talking about a puppy she had seen the other day when the woman shouted, “I just wanted to punch someone, it was so cute!”

This seemed like an oxymoron. Dr. Aragon was fascinated by her aggressive yet evidently enamored captivation with the puppy; she was baffled at this contrast of behavior and emotion. For the actress on CONAN at least, such a simple human emotion of joy precipitated into displays of the converse emotion, and Dr. Aragon “found it odd, quite frankly.” She had more questions than answers. Why do we cry when we are happy? Why do we laugh when we are nervous? Why did that actress want to punch someone when she was overcome with excitement for a puppy?

By exposing test subjects to morphologically diverse images of baby mammals and those of varying ages, Dr. Aragon found that humans exhibit a dimorphous display of emotion when exposed to images that are generally perceived as cute. This was why the actress’ reaction to the puppy was a combination of joy and aggression. Basically, there are certain features that humans find adorably cute. These features cause the brain to trigger an overwhelming display of emotions that can be unmanageable at first and express themselves in unintentional aggressive behaviors, such as playful growling, squeezing, biting, pinching, etc. More or less, when we see

something overwhelmingly cute, we are overcome by a need to care for whatever the thing was that elicited our reaction. This paralyzing emotional need to provide culminates in an intensely aggressive behavior of love (i.e. why grandma pinches the cheeks of her grandbaby).

Baby mammals all have shared morphological characteristics: big eyes, rounded cheeks, little noses, small chins, and big foreheads. This comprises what is known as “kindenschema,” more commonly referred to as “baby schema,” which is a term developed by Ethologist Konrad Lorenz in the 1960s. These features are objectively perceived as cute, and have been throughout our evolution as a species. When exposed to these features, the limbic system of the brain is activated, causing urges of caretaking in the observer. This causes a release of dopamine into the bloodstream, triggering certain emotive behaviors of “careful aggression,” said Dr. Aragon. Dopamine is the same chemical that is harnessed when smoking cocaine, as well as what is released during pleasurable experiences like watching a sunset, eating a delicious dessert, or having sex.

Other studies have shown a spike in acute carefulness when exposed to images of mammals with baby schema features. Jerry Sherman, for example, found that when subjects viewed such images, their actions were more calculated when playing the children’s game “Operation,” in which you use tweezers to remove objects from small containers without touching the tweezers to the sides of the container. This increase in acuteness illustrates just how body muscles change when they are prompted by a cute photo or live animal.

“It’s crazy how these baby features alone elicit such overwhelming feelings,” said Dr. Aragon. In fact, these morphological, facial characteristics do not even need to be attached to a baby mammal to be considered cute. In a different experiment, Dr. Aragon enhanced images of cars to mimic that of baby schema by increasing the size of headlights, making the windshield stouter, etc. Participants responded, “wow that car is so cute!” when they saw the images as their brain quickly decoded the kindenschema, triggering the same reaction as when we see a baby mammal. Scientifically, when we find something adorable like a manipulated image of a car, baby dolphin or seal pup, we are overcome with the desire to squeeze the living hell out of it because our protective parental instincts kick in.

The mission of the MMoME is to save stranded seals. They fail a lot of the time; some seals just do not make it due to consequences beyond the MMoME’s control. Perhaps the

greatest challenge that the MMoME has faced since its opening was the closing of the University of New England's seal rehabilitation center. "Without giving us any warning, they shut down their facility basically overnight right before Memorial Day weekend, the biggest weekend for pup strandings," said Dominique. Now there are approximately 70 fewer spots to send recovering seals, so not every seal that is phoned in even has a chance owing to the limited funding and facilities for seal stranding organizations. Then there are other circumstances when nature or human interference has already won, and there is nothing the MMoME can do to save a pup. "It's tough," said Bri, "there were ones that had to be euthanized right when we got there."



When Lynda pulled Bri aside one day in August and asked her to go check in on a reported seal pup on Popham Beach at the end of her shift, both of them knew there were no spots to treat the seal. She reluctantly agreed to go as it was protocol to check in on any seal, even if there is nowhere to take it, just in case the seal could be saved in the field.

She found the pup about a mile down the beach from where she parked her car, and right when she saw it she knew it was not going to make it much longer. "He was so skinny and so sad and so soft when he looked at me with his big, black eyes. I just sat down next to him and started crying because I could not do anything," said Bri, recalling her frustration at her helplessness. She left him under the stars. A spot opened up at the triage center the next day, but when she went to go check in on him, he was gone.