

The Sex Lives of Animals, Museum of Sex, New York, until early 2009

## DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY

A look at the range of sexual behaviours enjoyed by animals emphasises the point that sex has value and meaning way beyond procreation, says **Amanda Gefter**

GLANCING around at the images surrounding me – a deer threesome, a pair of West Indian manatees in a “69” position – I can’t help but feel like a bit of a pervert. Then I see flamingos that prefer to have sex while others are watching, a panda watching porn and a homosexual, necrophiliac mallard, and I think, these are the perverts. Only they’re not really, because whatever sexual activities these animals engage in are, by definition, natural. The Sex Lives

### “Dolphins engage in anal and blowhole penetration”

of Animals exhibition at the Museum of Sex in New York City makes clear that “natural” doesn’t rule out very much.

The Sex Lives of Animals is not a peep show, but a serious science exhibit whose advisory board boasts an impressive roster of scientists including Niles Eldredge, a curator at New York’s American Museum of Natural History, and biologist Marlene Zuk of the University of California, Riverside.

With a mission to shatter preconceived ideas about sexuality and defy gender stereotypes, the museum’s curator Sarah Jacobs teamed up with transgendered Stanford biologist Joan Roughgarden and Brooklyn-based artist Rune Olsen. In addition to photos, videos and text, the exhibition features

Olsen’s life-sized sculptures of canoodling animals (pictured). They are built from simple materials like newspaper and tape, but gaze at visitors with human-like glass eyes – “a political statement that we are all animals,” Olsen says.

The exhibition fulfils its promise to overturn common myths about animal sexuality. First, there’s the idea that animals engage in sex strictly for procreation. In fact, they participate in kissing, hugging, oral sex, masturbation and “every kind of penetrative intercourse imaginable”. Lionesses perform oral sex on lions, male grey-headed flying foxes perform oral sex on females, and Livingston’s fruit bats and male kangaroos perform fellatio on themselves. Spinner dolphins emit cries that vibrate the surrounding water and, in turn, one another’s genitals – a practice known as “buzzing”.

Then there is the notion that heterosexuality rules the animal world. This is not true: homosexuality has been documented in lions, giraffes, African elephants and American bison, to name a few. Male Amazon river dolphins engage in anal, genital and blowhole penetration, and a graphic photo shows two male grey whales engaged in an activity known as “penis fencing”.

Another myth shattered is the idea that organisms are either male or female. In as many as half of all animal species, individuals can be both at the same or



different times during their lives. Take the blue-banded goby, a fish that lives in harems with one male to every four to six females. If the male leaves or dies, the highest-ranking female develops male gonads and genitalia to take his place.

Many other species blur the lines between male and female. In woolly monkeys and spider monkeys the clitoris is as big, or bigger, than the penis, while male Malaysian and Bornean fruit bats have milk-producing mammary glands. Male sea horses, pipefish and sea dragons give birth to their young. And in the African jacana, a wading bird, male and female roles are reversed, with the males taking responsibility for the eggs.

The Sex Lives of Animals is both a celebration of sexual diversity and a rallying cry for

biologists to recognise the social aspects of sexual behaviour. Roughgarden is critical of Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, which portrays the animal kingdom as comprised of males competing for fussy females and, in her opinion, leaves little room for the range of sexual behaviour evident in nature. Instead, she promotes the theory of “social selection”, in which sexual behaviour serves to strengthen social bonds, be it sex for pleasure, including same-sex encounters, or procreation.

The exhibition is sure to stir up healthy debate among both biologists and those reluctant to accept the full spectrum of sexual practices in our own species. ●

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