Anatomical study confirms that harbor seals are good at learning varied calls

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De Reus and Ravignani found that the length of harbor seals' vocal tracts matched their body size. There were no anatomical explanations for their vocal skills. Rather, the researchers argue that only vocal learning can explain why harbor seals do not always sound like they look.

"Vocal learners will sound different from their body size, but the size of their vocal tracts will match their body size. The combined findings from acoustic and anatomical data may help us to identify more vocal learners," says de Reus. "Studying different vocal learners may help us to find the biological bases of vocal learning and shed light on the evolution of complex communication systems, such as speech. The more we look, the more we see that seals have something to say about human speech capacities," adds Ravignani.

The study is published in Journal of Experimental Biology.


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