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First Ever Notes on Tapir Reproduction in the Wild

By Leonardo Salas

In late October 2004, Juan de Dios Valdez Leal, working under the supervision of Charles Foerster – in Corcovado National Park, Costa Rica – went to locate the young offspring of one of Charlie’s collared females. Juan De Dios found the female with her offspring, but also something else as important as his observations of mother-infant relationship and infant survival: the first documented copulation of tapirs in the wild. He documented this most unusual observation with photographs and a detailed description of the duration of behaviors and vocalizations.

In all mammals, most investment in the production of offspring is the responsibility of the female. Because of this, and unlike males, females can only produce a limited number of offspring. It follows that they stand to profit most by ensuring that their genes have the best chances of survival and to be passed to another generation (in contrast, males need not be so choosy, because they can ensure their genes are passed on by copulating with as many females as possible). It is pre-

cisely because of this, as noted by Robert Trivers and other behaviorists nearly 30 years ago, that females are expected to be choosy and pick their male consorts with care to ensure that the male’s genetic contribution would result in offspring well equipped for the task of carrying and passing on those genes. This is one of the principles of sexual selection and is well supported by scientific evidence.

Tapirs are no exception to this principle, or at least we do not have a priori reasons to expect otherwise. Thus, Juan De Dios’ observations are all the more intriguing. He noted, for instance, that the female did not seem receptive to the male. The male attempted to mount seven times before eventually succeeding; yet, the female did not run away or confront the male with aggression. Moreover, there was no apparent selection behavior by the female, other than to resist the male for a while. Juan De Dios’ observations seem to indicate that there is no mate choice behavior in females. Perhaps the female knew where the most suitable male could probably be found and opted to spend time within his home range? Perhaps the selection of males happened before Juan De Dios got the “VIP seat”?

That matter aside, the observations are in agreement with either monogamy or a loose social system with a form of facultative polygyny similar to an extended harem, in which male tapirs would overlap (but not fully encompass) home ranges with those of several females. In an extended harem, a male patrols his home-range seeking signs of a female in heat. Upon finding the female, he forces copulation and secures parenthood. Other males may also overlap home ranges with the same female, so it is a matter of chance – being in the right place at the right time to pick up the cues leading to the receptive female – that is, if there is no female choice involved. Monogamy would imply a full overlap of male and female home ranges. I believe Charlie will solve this matter of the social system soon.

These observations are also important because we finally have a detailed report of the length of inter-birth interval in the wild for Baird’s tapirs. It is certainly shorter than I expected. How long? Go to: <http://www.icomvis.una.ac.cr/revista/articulos.htm>, download the article and do the numbers yourself.

*N.B. Although the article was published this year, for some reason it is listed as being in the 2001 volume of *Vida Silvestre Neotropical*. Don't be confused by the journal's volume date!*

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