



### ONE PUP - THREE “MOTHERS”

Rosa Pires, [Parque Natural da Madeira](#)

Last year in the Desertas Islands Nature Reserve, monk seals again used Tabaqueiro beach to breed. This open beach was first used in 1997 by two females (“Desertinha” and “Birisca”) and their pups [see [Saving seals at Madeira... a passionate affair](#), 6 (2): December 2003 and [Beach life, Desertas-style](#), TMG 5 (1): May 2002]. That was great news, since it proved that the seals at Desertas, after 9 years of protection, were at last confident enough to return to their original breeding sites on open beaches. It was also an indication that our work was starting to produce meaningful results!

We observed the seals on Tabaqueiro beach again in 1999, then in 2001 and most recently in 2003 – always between November and January or February.

During the first years, an immature seal would sporadically join the adult mothers “Birisca” and “Desertinha” and their pups on the beach, but in 2003 something different happened...



Birisca and Desertinha with the pup at Tabaqueiro beach.



Birisca trying to convince the pup to return to the sea.

A young female, named “Riscagrande”, with a cute pup, joined the two experienced mothers on Tabaqueiro. To follow the behaviour of these three females and the pup was both fascinating and curious! It appeared that each female had its own specific task in caring for the pup. The task of “Riscagrande”, its “biological” mother, was mainly to feed him. Although she consequently spent less time in the bay, the pup was not alone when her mother disappeared for long periods. “Birisca” and “Desertinha” were excellent “nannies”, very concerned in taking care of him. In fact, the pup spent more time with “Birisca” and “Desertinha” than with his own mother. Quite often we observed the young pup trying to suckle from these females, but of course it was only with “Riscagrande” that he had any success.

The amazing thing was that these females shared their task respecting each other’s time. When the young pup returned from the sea, for example, a different female would look after him, thereby freeing the other to rest or feed.

Many other behaviours were equally fascinating: the females used to position their bodies so as to shield the pup from strong waves. They also used to force the pup to follow their movements

whether at sea or on land. What's more, we observed mock fights between them, when they exchanged positions and their duties towards the young seal.

Only on three occasions did one adult male share the beach to rest with this group of seals, although he did not have any contact with the females or the pup. This was the male that had been previously observed courting the females; in all probability, he was the father of this pup. In other years, however, this male was observed interacting with isolated pups on sea – a close interaction, rather more typical of the kind seen between mother and pup, involving frequent and close physical contact, such as nuzzling.

After all the field work, we've concluded that the chance of survival of this pup is higher, since he has not only one mother but three protecting him from trouble.

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