

Elephant Seal

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What is probably the first recorded instance of an elephant seal chewing tobacco has been reported by a scientist who accompanied a recent expedition of The University of California's Scripps Institution of Oceanography to Guadalupe Island, 160 miles off the Baja California coast.

Dr. Reid V. Moran, Botanist from the San Diego Natural History Museum, twice observed one of the island's colony of elephant seals eating the leaves of the Indian tobacco, a common weed on the West Coast. The plant contains nicotine.

Elephant seals grow as long as 20 feet and can reach eight tons in weight. Dr. Arthur L. Kelly, student of mammals at Scripps, says that plant remains are often found in their stomachs. "Usually the plant is kelp, because there is so much of that in the sea, but if they can reach land plants, they probably will eat them." Kelly says the elephant seal may have been bored or frustrated. "Animals often tear at plants when their normal habits are interfered with. This is called 'displacement activity.' If a sea gull is frustrated in his breeding habits, for example, he will often tear at the turf with his beak."

Dr. Moran says the tobacco plant is a relatively new introduction to the island, although it is widespread on the mainland. "We know it must have been introduced between 1932 and 1948," he says. "It seems to be spreading. The goats, the largest land animals there, won't eat it."