



Unedited footage shot for
*The Nature of Play: Part 1, River
Otters*, dir. Gregory Bateson
and Weldon Kees, 1954. Frame
enlargements of otters playing
with a reel of film thrown into
the enclosure by the filmmakers.
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The Nature of Play: Part 1, River Otters

GREGORY BATESON AND WELDON KEES

The following is a transcript of a twenty-three-minute, black-and-white 16 mm film directed by Gregory Bateson and Weldon Kees in 1954, narrated by Charles Levy, with text by Bateson and Kees, editing by Kees and William Heick, and music by Jon Sutton. A copy of the film is held by the Gregory Bateson Papers, University of California, Santa Cruz, and was transcribed by Rebecca Ora; it is reproduced with the permission of the Bateson Idea Group. Although The Nature of Play was conceived as a multipart series of educational films, Bateson and Kees completed only Part 1. The images from Part 1 and the uncompleted Part 2 are from a digital transfer of the 16 mm originals held in the Bateson Collection at the Don D. Jackson Archive, University of Louisiana at Monroe; they were collected on-site in spring 2015 and are reproduced with the permission of the Bateson Idea Group and Nora Bateson, with the aid of Wendel Ray.

—Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan

[Voiceover by male voice. Music plays throughout.]

What is play? When the scientist looks at something like play, he starts as it were from scratch.

[Kids playing on seesaw, dog playing.]

With a feeling that he doesn't know what this phenomenon is he knows that it is complicated, beautiful, that it is shared by men and other animals, perhaps other creatures, the scientist is puzzled first that he can recognize play in other animals other than himself and his own species. From such a puzzled beginning this film was started.

[Monkey and bird playing, bear.]

And here is Gregory Bateson.

[Bateson seated behind desk with plant behind him.]

[Bateson speaking to the camera:] Actually, the work of this film, thinking about it, started one day when Weldon Kees and I went to the zoo with a particular question in mind: Whether animals other than man know that their actions can be understood by other animals as signals, or are they a reflex automatic behavior which touches off the appropriate automatic reply in another animal? We went to the zoo to try to get an answer to this question and what we discovered [was] something familiar, namely that animals play, and that they seem to know that each other's play is play. That sounds



Unedited footage shot for *The Nature of Play: Part 1, River Otters*, dir. Gregory Bateson and Weldon Kees, 1954. Frame enlargements of otters at the central area of their enclosure with a small object thrown by the filmmakers. Bateson Collection at the Don D. Jackson Archive, University of Louisiana at Monroe. Reproduced with permission of the Bateson Idea Group.

trivial and obvious but it means that animals other than man can exchange two orders of message. The meaningful acts of play or combat and also hints or indications to each other as to whether these acts are play or combat.

Whatever play is, it is clear that animals can exchange signals labeling play as such.

Now, river otters are well known to be playful and therefore we concentrated on the two male otters which had been at the zoo for about 4 years.

For the remainder of this film, we will focus on the behavior of these two otters.

[Voiceover:] When they were first observed in January they were charming, but not particularly playful.

[Otters silhouetted running in a circle; swimming.]

They swam a good deal alone.

[Man by enclosure throws food to otters, who pick up fish with mouths, eat.]

Feeding time.

They didn't play with their food.

[Otters chewing.]

And they didn't play with each other.

They scratched themselves on the grass of their enclosure, and seemed to itch a great deal.

[Otters rub selves on the ground.]

The curator of the zoo suggested they might play with rubber balloons.

[Otters with balloons.]

And they did play a little with them, and seemed to have met with balloons before.

[Otter with balloon in mouth. Otter with popped balloon in mouth.]

There was a trace of competition, one otter seeming to want the balloon the other one had, but they didn't put this competition into action, and they didn't play with each other.

They came back for another balloon.

[Otter with balloon against wall shot from above. Otter swims with balloon.]

One day in late march, an unplanned and unrepeatable experiment was started.

[Man's hands tying string around object.]

Bateson and Kees thought the otters might play like kittens with a wad of paper dangled on the end of a string. So this was tried.

[Man tying string outside enclosure.]

They left their food.

[Otter chasing dangling toy.]

They were a little afraid of the paper.

Then the two otters competed for the paper, and began to play with each other ending in a rough and tumble while the paper was left dangling.

[Otters tumbling.]

And now what was almost a fight had become distinctly play. This was the first time in 2 months of intermittent observation that they were seen playing together.

[Playful music as otters play with string. Man's hands with string.]

Immediately after the game with the paper, a piece of real fish was dangled on the string.

[Otters chase fish on string.]

They both want the fish but now competition is muted. When one otter has the fish in his mouth, the other stops trying. It's as if to compete for a toy is a game but to compete for food would be something else. A combat, perhaps.

[Otters, fish on string, etc. Both chase fish on string. Playful music.]

Eventually they seemed to become bored.

[Fade to black. Bateson at desk again.]

[Bateson speaking:] Two days later, the otters were still playing together, and from that day on throughout the summer they spent a great part of their time in this sort of play. What seems to have happened is that a sort of boredom was cured by our unplanned experiment. We introduced a symbolic object, a sort of toy, for a few minutes only, but this seems to have been enough to change their whole system of action.

It's not possible, though, to exclude the seasonal factor. Perhaps, on that day in March, the two otters were ready for a change in their relationship.

But, whether the earlier non-playfulness were [*sic*] merely characteristic winter behavior, or sort of sick boredom, it still seems the change was precipitated by our experiment. Here they are, two months later.

[Otters swim in sync.]

[Voiceover:] They even play with their food, taking the meat into the water.

[Otters swimming with food in mouths.]

One otter would like the other's piece of meat but takes no action to get it.



Unedited footage shot for *The Nature of Play: Part 1, River Otters*, dir. Gregory Bateson and Weldon Kees, 1954. Frame enlargements of otter looking at camera and otters nipping one another while at play. Bateson Collection at the Don D. Jackson Archive, University of Louisiana at Monroe. Reproduced with permission of the Bateson Idea Group.



Frame enlargements from an unfinished sequel to *The Nature of Play*, dir. Gregory Bateson and Weldon Kees, that focused on seeing-eye dogs as an example of animals at work, ca. 1954. Faces have been blurred to protect the anonymity of the subjects. Bateson Collection at the Don D. Jackson Archive, University of Louisiana at Monroe. Reproduced with permission of the Bateson Idea Group.

Or perhaps he's waiting until the other has finished eating so they can start playing again.

[Otters interacting and chewing.]

In the meanwhile, he has a solitary game. Underneath the plank is a piece of chicken wire.

He goes back to see if any food is left.

[Two otters swimming together playfully.]

They played like this for hours and hours every day during this time.

And during this period, they groomed each other instead of scratching themselves on the grass as they did before the experiment.

Gradually, in the fall, their play diminished.

And by December the otters were back to a point of almost ignoring each other and again they began to scratch themselves on the grass.

[Man at side of enclosure with paper tied with string.]

Next month, in January, Bateson and Kees tried to tempt them into play by again dangling a paper toy of a sort the otters had not seen since 10 months before.

[Otter interacting with paper on string. Otter going off alone in grass.]

This time the experiment did not work, perhaps because there are no recipes in psychotherapy.

[Fade to black. Bateson at desk.]

[Bateson speaking:] Alright. So, these two otters learned from a toy which was not food to engage in play which was not combat.

In human terms play and metaphor are closely related. The paper toy stood for, but was not, food or something like it. And the abstract hint which the otters must be able to receive from each other might be put in such words as

[Cut.]

We shall go on in other films of this series to ask about people who have been so confused by their experiences that they cannot tell what sort of a message a message is. These are the people who are called schizophrenics, and who exemplify, we believe, the state of man when he fails to discriminate that which is discriminated by otters.

[Fade to otters playing in water with playful music.]

THE END