

## MARINA DEL REY

# Nautical News

## Local marine biologist 'confesses' about L.A. dolphin population

BY PAT REYNOLDS

Without a doubt, one of the most gratifying feelings anyone can experience during a day of boating on the Santa Monica Bay is a visit from the dolphins that reside here.

Whether it's the more excitable common dolphin or the calmer bottlenose, an interaction or witnessing of these animals is always special. I have seen the most jaded and guarded personalities transform to child-like awe in the close presence of dolphins and I am always humbled, in a distinct and unique way, when they cross my path.

There's something fascinating about seeing another intelligent animal, breathing our same air, operating in a complete counter reality. There is strong argument that these individuals, like us, communicate, problem-solve and feel emotion. Under the surface of the ocean, dolphins go about their lives while we attempt to understand their behavior through relatively limited contact.

Researching dolphin in the wild is not easy – they cover vast areas of expanse and are constantly on the move. Gathering information is a painstaking affair, therefore learning definitively about who these creatures truly are requires patience. In our waters, a local marine scientist, Dr. Maddalena Bearzi, has been tracking the Los Angeles population for 14 years and has now written a book of her experiences called "Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist."

In 1996, Bearzi founded the Los Angeles Dolphin Project in California, the first comprehensive



**DR. MADDALENA BEARZI** has been researching local dolphins in the Santa Monica Bay for the past 16 years and has recently written a book entitled 'Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist.'

marine mammal study ever conducted in L.A. waters that has since become one of the longest running dolphin studies in California. She also co-founded Ocean Conservation Society that focuses on the protection and stewardship of the oceans. In the book she details, in a personal way, her life-long relationship to the sciences and her long running dolphin research in the Los Angeles area as well as other areas around the world.

"I wanted to give the readers a down-to-earth, very simple and candid view of what it means to work with these animals," Bearzi said. "To not only take them into my world as a marine scientist and have them understand more about marine mammal behavior but also highlighting some of the frustra-

tions, creativity and joy that make up dolphin research."

In studying the local marine mammal populations, Bearzi has made discoveries involving the never-before-explored feeding relationship between sea lions and dolphins and she has also broadened the understanding of the bottlenose dolphin populations.

Through her photo identification work, she has identified all the individual dolphins moving in and out of Santa Monica Bay and dispelled the notion that there are indeed two separate populations of bottlenose dolphins – inshore and offshore – that these populations are not as distinct as previously thought, and individuals from the two populations can actually mix.

Bearzi has also brought to light certain skin diseases local dolphins are showing that may well point to human generated pollutants that ultimately could affect or are affecting our own food supply.

Bearzi and her team of research assistants try to disturb their subjects as little as possible and do all photo/video related material from a research boat.

"I always try and respect the dolphins' environment and disturb them as little as possible," Bearzi said. "We take photographs, video, record sound, collect fish scales to see what they feed upon. We also collect all different kind of data including environmental and oceanographic."

But while Bearzi is first an objective scientist, through her years of interacting with these same animals, she confesses that she sees things differently than she once did.

"When I first started studying



**MARINE SCIENTIST Dr. Maddalena Bearzi** photographs a bottlenose dolphin during her research in the Santa Monica Bay.

these animals, I vowed to view them as a group – as the object of a study, but the more I studied them the more I realized that they are really individuals with their own personalities and emotions," she said. "They're very intelligent, complex, emotional beings which we should learn to respect a lot more than we have in the past."

Although not all scientists are ready to agree that dolphins are indeed "emotional," Bearzi asserts that through her thousands of hours witnessing dolphin behavior, it's obvious they are, even if emotions in these animals are expressed in a different way.

"If you spend many hours in the field you'll observe it," she said. "For instance, if you look at the compassion of a mother in taking care of her calf – it really reminds you of a human mother with a child – it's very compelling. Or

how dolphins can mourn for other individuals. The more time you spend with these animals the more you'll understand how close they are to us."

Because of these experiences and realizations, Bearzi has shifted her focus from studying their behavior to more vigilantly attempting to protect these animals and their environment.

"The more I learned about them, the more I tried to protect them in their natural state," Bearzi said. "Writing for me is my way to make people understand how wonderful these animals are and how important it is to protect them."

*"Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist" is published by Chicago University Press and is available on Amazon.com and at most book stores.*

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