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Local biologist co-authors book on dolphin/ape behavior

BY PAT REYNOLDS

Anyone who has ever ventured past the Marina breakwater and had the privilege of crossing paths with a group of dolphins can't help but marvel at this most fascinating species.

There have been countless stories in support of their supreme intelligence, many of them defying what has been expected or defined about them. Some speculate that not only are these animals as intelligent as humans, but perhaps they, in certain ways, are on an even higher plane.

But that argument aside, what is factual is that these mammals are in elite company in terms of the planet's most evolved creatures. They communicate through language, have advanced social structure and clearly operate on a more sophisticated intellectual level than most other animals.

Here in Southern California we are fortunate that there is an abundance of dolphins to be seen. Most boaters have had the opportunity to observe dolphin behavior at some point and most, after the experience, become curious as to what they are all about.

For answers to the many questions that flood the mind after interacting with our air-breathing cousins of the ocean, Dr. Maddalena Bearzi, a marine biologist doing research in the Santa Monica Bay, is a great resource.

Bearzi has been monitoring the local population of marine mammals with a special focus on dolphins for over a decade and she continues to explore and discover information that is on the leading edge of the scientific curve.

She has done groundbreaking work in her analysis of the little-studied relationship between dolphin and sea lions and most recently she has published a book with co-author Craig B. Stanford, co-director of the Jane Goodall Research Center, called *Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins*, which appears in bookstore shelves this week from Harvard University Press.

While Bearzi is a scientist to her core — as skeptical, objective and reticent as she should be, given her occupation — she allows herself in this book to discuss the species in a more personal way. She discusses how she felt the first time she connected with a dolphin in her youth and an instance where a group of dolphins led her and her research team to a drowning woman one afternoon. The professional in her maintains that this could well have been a coincidence, but she concedes that this behavior didn't agree with normal dolphin patterns.

"As a scientist, I don't really believe all these stories that you hear about human/dolphins interactions," said Bearzi of the occurrence. "I'm always skeptical and still am after this adventure, but if we hadn't followed the dolphins and they hadn't circled we never would have found [the drowning woman]."

"Could it be, it was completely a coincidence? Probably, but I thought it was an interesting story."

After Bearzi and Stanford, who has been studying great apes for nearly 20 years, met and began discussing their respective studies, they realized that while each species existed in such a completely different physical environment, they had much in common.

"The more we were talking the more we realized how many things these animals have in common," Bearzi says. "So we talked quite a bit and decided we should write a book together and discuss these large-brained, really intelligent mammals that have these complex communicational abilities and social interactions."

They spent four years writing *Beautiful Minds*, in a format that shifts between the two authors' respective experiences, but through the course of the book, the reader begins to recognize and understand not only the similarities between the two species, but also between them and ourselves.

"There are many similarities in all aspects of their lives," Bearzi states. "First of all, they both come from complex societies. Bottlenose and chimps for example, have alliances, same as humans.

"Males may have allies for different reasons — for dolphins to coerce females; and dominance, for chimps.

"Both animals have really strong bonds between mother and young — as do we, and they communicate in a very complex way.

"They also both have some type of culture, not unlike what you could find in humans."

The book is effective in how it gradually creates an empathy for the animals and then reminds us that their existence is fragile and endangered. Ultimately, Bearzi admits the book is a call for protection and awareness.

"We speak a lot about that and the fear of losing these animals in this book," she says. "The last chapter is called 'Beautiful Minds are a Terrible Thing to Waste' and it basically explains that the species are so wonderful and we are risking their loss if we don't do something about it. I think that's the most important part of the book. We want people to understand how magnificent they are and how important they are and we are really at risk in losing them all.

"There is a species of river dolphin in China that are already extinct. It's a species that has gone extinct in our lifetime — when you think about that it's a little bit scary."

Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins (Harvard University Press) is available in bookstores or can be ordered through [Amazon .com/](https://www.amazon.com/).