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[Maddalena Bearzi](#)

Founder, Los Angeles
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What I Learned From Working With Dolphins (PHOTOS)

Posted: 04/16/2012 2:58 pm

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"Why do you study dolphins?" an enthusiastic honor student asks me as we walk through the metal detectors at his high school in a gang-infested neighborhood of Los Angeles. I was invited here to give a talk to his class about my experiences as a marine biologist and the current problems facing local dolphins and their habitat.

I tell him how, at the beginning, I was motivated mainly by the naïve curiosity of a nature-lover drawn toward dolphins and their underwater world. That same sense of inquisitiveness later turned into the desire of a young scientist methodically striving to learn more about these magnificent creatures, to dig deeper into the secrets of their everyday lives.

When I began doing research in my twenties, I had no idea I would gradually become a staunch advocate for dolphin protection. It wasn't something I thought about or I planned but, after spending thousands of hours in the company of these animals at sea, coming to know them better, I stopped seeing dolphins simply as the object of my studies. To me, they had become individuals, each with its own personalities and emotions. They are remarkably similar to us in so many ways. As time passed, I observed the ocean changing around me and the creatures I had come to love in serious peril. And I came to believe that ocean conservation, creating awareness, and finding ways to transform that awareness into action, are all that matter.

In the epilogue of my book *Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist* [University of Chicago Press, \$26.00], I write: "only through the individual cultivation of hope, love, passion, compassion, humility, education and active involvement, can we build a strong sense of stewardship of our world within our communities. People, not governments, must shape the direction in which decisions are made. Each of us has a say in the future of the dolphins, of whales, of the oceans and of our own species. Exercising that say is our chance for greatness, perhaps the last chance."

Dr. Bearzi photographs a bowriding dolphin for skin disease analysis.

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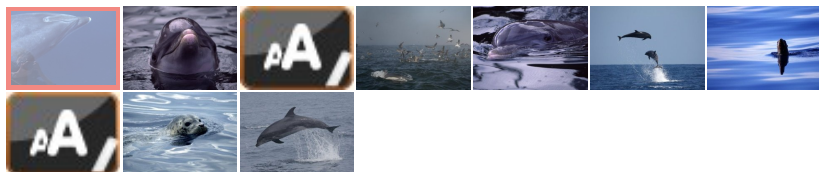
				
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How our skin appears often reflects how we feel and the same is true of dolphins. Over the last few years, scientists around the world have begun to notice the presence of skin lesions on various cetacean species. Both, environmental and anthropogenic factors seem to be implicated in the rising prevalence of diseases in marine mammals. This image, taken from my research boat in Southern California, will be used to document and evaluate bottlenose dolphins' skin lesions. Taking images like this is one way we can gather key information on these animals' health status and document the presence of pathogens. Monitoring lesions on dolphins may reveal potential implications not only on their health but on human health as well.



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