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Marine biologist Maddalena Bearzi on the company of dolphins

By Angela Hill

Oakland Tribune

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Many of us love dolphins, for their intelligence, their beauty, their sly ever-present "smiles." Renowned marine biologist Maddalena Bearzi loves these magnificent sea mammals, too, but on a much deeper level. For more than 20 years, she has studied them in California waters and throughout the world, developing a sincere appreciation for them, recognizing them as socially complex, highly intelligent and emotional beings -- and fellow creatures of the planet that needs protection.

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Marine biologist Maddalena Bearzi has spent 20 years studying dolphins and now... (Nick Lammers)

With this evolving perspective, Bearzi, who grew up in Italy and now lives in Los Angeles, has seen her career develop from her earliest days as a young research scientist to her current stance as a fierce advocate for conservation and dolphin protection. She is president of the Ocean Conservation Society, which she co-founded in 1998; her latest book is "Dolphin Confidential -- Confessions of a Field Biologist." During a presentation Wednesday at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, Bearzi will share insights on dolphin behavior and critical environmental problems facing sea creatures (6 p.m. 595 Market St.; \$20, \$7 students; 415-597-6700, www.commonwealthclub.org).

In the meantime, Bearzi recently took some time out for an email interview about her life with dolphins:

Q What drew you to explore the lives of dolphins and other sea mammals?

A As a child, I was fascinated by nature and drawn

to the sea and its inhabitants. I used to spend summers camped out with my family on a remote beach in Sardinia, in Italy. Later on, I began reading about dolphins and the complexity of their societies, and I became intrigued. ...

Q You've come to recognize individual personalities and even emotions of dolphins. Tell us what some of your underwater friends are like, how their thoughts and emotions are conveyed to humans.

A Dolphins never cease to surprise me. For instance, I've witnessed firsthand the compassion of a mother in caring for her calf. I've seen dolphins grieving for the loss of a companion. In my book, "Dolphin Confidential," I recount a touching story of a school of dolphins that, by leading our research boat offshore, enabled my team and me to save a young girl from drowning in what seemed a suicide attempt. Was it coincidence that the dolphins led us to the girl? Perhaps, but I still wonder about that day. The girl would have died were it not for the dolphins.

Q In addition to valuable data, what has your research

taught you about dolphins, about the planet, about yourself?

A If I have to summarize in a word ... that word would probably be "humility." To protect dolphins -- and our own species -- we must protect the oceans, and to do so, we must first consider ourselves an integral part of a grand natural system. I feel connected to the animal world by my humanity, not superior to it.

Q What prompted you to take your work a step further and become an advocate for dolphin protection?

A Unfortunately, I -- and many scientists -- don't have the luxury of just doing pure research anymore. Traveling around the world to study dolphins, I have witnessed firsthand the dramatic changes to our environment and the challenges facing these animals. Dolphin species are disappearing now, in our lifetime, due to human impact. It makes me sad to think that the world I grew up in has changed to such a degree that the encounters with dolphins I've experienced may soon become

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Q Protecting sea creatures and our ocean environment seems a daunting task. How can individuals help?

A I argue that people, and not only governments, must shape the directions in which decisions are made. A clear first step is to cultivate a better knowledge of the issues facing our planet and become actively involved in the protection of our oceans, even if this means getting outside one's respective comfort zone. We need to build a stronger sense of stewardship within our communities.

Q What's next for you in your research? What questions do you still have?

A I am currently working to better understand skin diseases and physical deformities that I've found in dolphins in my study area in Southern California. The presence of these diseases is related to environmental factors like temperature and salinity but also to man-made pollutants. This should concern us because it has potential implications for human health. What questions do I still have? Probably more than I will ever answer in my lifetime.

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