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by Marc Bekoff

Dolphin Confidential: A Woman and the Dolphins She Loves

Read a wonderful book about the adventures of a passionate scientist

Published on March 26, 2012 by Marc Bekoff, Ph.D. in Animal Emotions

Every now and again an easy to read and inspirational book comes along, written in a personal tone by someone who's a card-carrying scientist and clearly loves the animals they study. *Dolphin Confidential* is one of them and I'm pleased to recommend it highly on many accounts.

In her latest book, Maddalena Bearzi, a passionate scientist and co-author of another wonderful book called *Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins*, writes about what it is like to be a highly intelligent and emotional being such as a dolphin and also tells readers about what it is like to do scientific field research. In 1996, Bearzi founded the *Los Angeles Dolphin Project*, the first comprehensive marine mammal study ever conducted in the waters around Los Angeles.

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It's really educational to read an informed account of what it takes to study animal behavior and work on the conservation of a given species. While studying animals for hours and years on end can surely be enjoyable, it also can be extremely frustrating, disappointing, time-consuming, and exhausting. Some think it's all fun and games to swim with dolphins, watch chimpanzees run about and swing in the trees, or track wolves or coyotes, for example, but it's not.

Wild animals often live in environments that are very challenging to us, aren't always around when we want them to be, and don't perform on command. Having done field work on a number of different animals I well remember sitting on my butt, waiting for days on end for something, anything to happen, and trying to convince my co-workers, as we were freezing in -40 degree cold watching coyotes living around Jackson, Wyoming, that it was all worth it. I also remember 24 hour watches and needing only a few more data points to complete one aspect of a study and waiting a year or more for them to materialize, that is, for the animals to do something that was related to the questions at hand. I also remember getting nipped in the butt as I looked into a coyote den to see if the pups were there and an Adelie penguin squawking and beating me ferociously with his wing as I walked around a colony counting chicks at Cape Crozier, Antarctica. They were both clearly telling me to leave, and I did. I had intruded into their homes and wasn't welcomed.

Scientists are humans first and foremost and in addition to the fun and rigors of doing field work, we see individuals get injured and die during the course of a study, often at the hands of humans. We also see them lose their homes because of human sprawl and other sorts of intrusions in which our interests selfishly trump theirs. Watching individuals suffer in this

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way is deeply sad and depressing, but in some studies it's all part of the effort of learning as much as we can about them so that we can help them and others in the future.

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Bearzi's behind the scenes accounts of the ups and downs of doing fieldwork is an informative and much-needed exposé, one that perhaps will help future researchers make better choices about where they want to focus their efforts. In her own words about her confessions of being a field biologist she writes, "This story chronicles the transformation processes by which I began my career in wide-eyed naivete, then slowly shifted toward the belief that conservation and protection of nature is virtually all that matters."

Writing about the urban dolphins living around Los Angeles, Bearzi writes, "Over time, I've learned how they cleverly deal with an ever-challenging ocean; I see how alike they are to other, seemingly unrelated species, including my own. The more I have watched dolphins in the wild, the less I saw them as objects of my research or as an anonymous and undistinguished group. Rather, I began seeing them as single individuals, not solely for their scars and notches, but also for their personality and emotions."

I hope this book receives the attention it deserves and I will surely recommend it highly as an informative scientific and personal narrative about these fascinating animals and what we all must do to protect them before it's too late. Budding scientists will also find much food for thought in this inspirational read. It's essential not to remove the person/researcher from the experience of watching and learning about the fascinating lives of other animals. Bonding with animals does not preclude doing solid science. Indeed, as Bearzi and others clearly show, it helps us do better science.



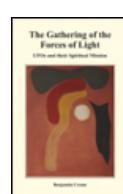
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