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## Dolphin, whale expert speaks at University of Redlands

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Around 100 people gathered last week to hear the “confessions” of marine biologist and dolphin researcher, Maddalena Bearzi, at the University of Redlands Orton Center, in a talk sponsored by the school’s Human Animal Studies Program and the National Museum of Animals and Society.

After taking her audience through a photo journey of her formative years, Bearzi then launched into the personal connections she has made through the years with the natural world that form the basis of her recent book, “Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist.”

Bearzi, who’s also written the book, “Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins,” has a wide-ranging interest in nature that extends beyond her immediate studies to embrace an appreciation for all of creation. That appreciation has resulted in her founding the Los Angeles Dolphin Project, and to co-found the Ocean Conservation Society.

Raised in Italy, she delivered her talk in an accent steeped with the cadence of her Italian origins.

Although she has concentrated on dolphins, she has also studied whales, and shared many stories about them.

“Killer whales,” she said, “have a unique vocalization,” while blue whales also inspire her.

“Among the many amazing encounters with dolphins and whales off California,” she said, “I’ll always remember my first encounter with a blue whale. At the time I had a small power boat. I was near Catalina, and this whale just surfaced next to my boat. I remember the blow hole.”

As she continued her studies, she said, “the research became more complex.” And sometimes, she revealed, that research led her and her fellow scientists into some unexpected experiences, which included one incident that can only be described as bizarre.

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They were about three miles off the California coast when they noticed a large school of dolphins. As they moved closer to see what was attracting them, they “noticed that the dolphins formed a circle.” Upon closer inspection, they discovered a girl floating in the midst of that circle. She obviously needed help, but when Bearzi called the lifeguard, they “told us not to do anything.”

She and her companions decided to “disregard” that advice, pulled her aboard, slipped off her clothes to warm her, and noticed that she had a plastic bag attached to her pants with information inside. It turned out that the girl had intended to commit suicide, and Bearzi saw it as more than just a “coincidence” that the dolphins were surrounding the girl. They seemed to care.

“People often ask me: do dolphins have emotions? And the short answer is: yes. Absolutely.” The time she’s spent with them has convinced her of that.

Bearzi closed her talk by acknowledging how much she still wants to know “about the complex lives of dolphins and whales. There is still so much to learn,” she said, but added that she was “growing more and more worried about their future.” Some species, she fears, may not have a future, and called for greater ocean protection.

When asked how those protections can come about, she called on the audience to get in touch with lawmakers and keep advocating for the lives of our fellow creatures who live in the oceans. She reminded her audience that the best chance for them to effect lasting change is through their elected representatives.

When asked, she also expressed misgivings about the way sea creatures like orcas are treated at amusement parks like Sea World; treatment that was exposed in the documentary film, “Blackfish,” which came out last year.

Bearzi urged the audience to avoid places like Sea World. If people want to view ocean life up close, she said, they should take one of the many whale watching cruises offered along our coast.

She also recommended another documentary called “The Cove,” an 2009 expose of the way dolphins are treated in some parts of Japan, where fishermen and whalers often view them as a nuisance and competition. It won the “Best Documentary” Oscar at the 2010 Academy Awards.

Bearzi also said that as her research has deepened and become more involved through the years, she’s discovered that it takes more than just an initial interest to do what’s she’d doing — it takes “passion.”

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