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The Dolphin Detective



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Six miles off the coast of Marina Del Rey, Ocean Conservation Society president Maddalena Bearzi Ph.D. '03 peers through binoculars and points to grebes and gulls swirling above a roiling patch of water several hundred yards off the starboard side of the boat — dolphins at three o'clock.

Every five minutes for the next three hours, as the boat tracks different groups of dolphins, Bearzi relays her observations to a volunteer who records them on a laptop computer. How many dolphins? Dispersed or concentrated? Are they milling, leaping or riding the bow's wake? Are sea lions or birds present? What are the water and weather conditions?

This is the nitty-gritty of Bearzi's work studying dolphins in Santa Monica Bay and educating the public, especially students, about life at sea and the animals in it. Actually, it's more of a passion for the sea-loving scientist, a quest to understand an animal species that mesmerizes mankind — and how the presence of dolphins affects the ecology of the bay.

Bearzi and her husband, Charlie Saylan, cofounded the nonprofit Ocean Conservation Society in 1998 to support the research and link it to community outreach and education. Since 1997, she has logged more than 1,100 hours on the water.



Maddalena Bearzi

"I really like to work in the wild," says Bearzi, who won the Alumni Association's Outstanding Graduate Student Award in 2003. "I like to be in contact with the animals."

Bearzi, 41, arrived in L.A. in 1995 with an undergraduate degree in natural science from the University of Padova in her native Italy. She came already experienced in dolphin, sea turtle and other research in Mexico, Greece and elsewhere for the Milan-based Tethys Research Institute. While sailing with future husband Saylan, she took note of the dolphins, found little research had been done on the marine mammals in the bay, and developed a plan that would lead to her doctorate in 2003.

Her dissertation was the first extended study of dolphins in the bay, an area of about 177 square miles from Point Dume in Malibu to the Palos Verdes Peninsula. She is particularly interested in studying bottlenose dolphins as an indicator of the bay's ecological health by taking tissue samples and analyzing them for contaminants.

"We don't understand enough about the movements of these dolphins, and they're clearly important species in the ecosystem," says Shelley Luce D.Env. '03, executive director of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission.

Meanwhile, Bearzi and Saylan continue to teach. One program introduces middle and high school students to scientific research by bringing them aboard the nonprofit's boat for training sessions about the marine environment and data collection. And on May 24, Bearzi began teaching a UCLA Extension class that offers an overview of marine biology, oceanography and conservation — particularly dolphins.

Bearzi hopes her students, no matter what their age, develop an emotional connection to the playful water mammals she has committed her career to studying because, as she writes on her Web site, "We passionately protect the things we love."

INTERFACE

Wet and Wild

Want to heal the Bay? See a dolphin? Volunteer to help? Log on to the [Ocean Conservation Society's Web site](#) to learn about upcoming programs, donate, or participate in field surveys or marina cleanups. Plus, view a breathtaking online photo gallery of Santa Monica Bay's sea world.