

Following Dolphin Flukeprints: A Woman's Battle to Protect the Animals She Loves

October 22, 2012

Dolphins leap above the waves off Alabama's Orange Beach. Photo: Cal Britton, My Shot

I'm swimming slowly and alone through crystalline waters beneath a cobalt-blue sky. My skin feels pleurably numb immersed in this medium. I am totally free, as I turn and dive effortlessly toward the white sandy bottom.

I can move as I choose, up and down with the motion of the waves in continuous harmony. I have no destination or future here, no resistance to this fluid world. I dream of being a dolphin without laws, clocks, duties, or clothes; liberated of earthly restraints and inhibitions; moving smoothly through the water with my powerful streamlined body in this three-dimensional life.

All around me, I see other dolphins. I feel I am part of a family, but it's somehow different from my terrestrial one. We are a grand and flexible family, yet I have a strong sense that our underlying bonds remain constant. I reach a huddle of mothers and calves. Seven females are clustered, forming a protective screen of bodies around a pregnant female. They swim beside and below her, waiting for the moment to arrive.

In a cloud of blood, a newborn comes to life. Mother and offspring existences will be united for years to come. I watch as the new mother, her newborn, and all dolphins move away and disappear. I rush to follow them, but I can't. My movements become clumsy and my body heavy. I am unable to hold my breath any longer. The phone rings. I fight hard to remain asleep, to stay with the dolphins.

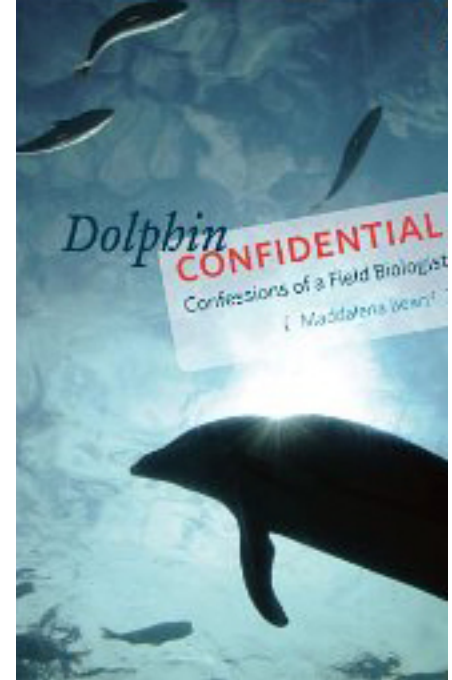
But it rings again, relentlessly. It's the end of my dream and the beginning of a new day on Earth. I've been in the company of dolphins for more than twenty years, observing their social behaviors, their emotions, and the striking similarities to our species. I feel at home with them. They are in my life, sometimes even in my dreams.

Learning From Animals

This intimate life with dolphins, whales, and other creatures has left a profound and beautiful impression on me. Because of them, I often question myself about my place on this planet, and what traces I will leave behind me. I've encountered many animals in my work, some more clever than others, but they all—in their own way—taught me lessons of humility and made me wonder about humanity's conceit and insatiable greed.

When I first walked into the unknown natural world of animals, I had little skill or confidence. I was driven only by a great passion and curiosity for all kinds of living beings, with which I share tenancy on Earth. Guided by raw enthusiasm, I experienced wildlife firsthand as a child, venturing into out-of-the-way territory and meeting new animal friends along my way, both on land and at sea. Gradually, I became a woman and a marine biologist.

A little at a time, I grew more at ease with my chosen vocation and more proficient in my work in the field. With age and experience on my side, some of my early insecurities, as well as the perceived boundaries left over from my upbringing, began to soften and dissolve, even if sometimes I still doubt myself, the significance of my work, and the meaning of my existence. My life, so far, has been an amazing journey between mind and nature, at times hard and unkind, but by and large rewarding.



I still feel that I know little of the complex lives of dolphins. Despite the years I've spent with them in the wild, I am struck by how much there is still to learn and discover of their ways and of their world. And at the same time, I grow increasingly worried about their future status and well-being. In the relatively short time I've devoted to studying dolphins, I've witnessed a dramatic increase in the number and magnitude of insidious threats facing these animals and their ecosystems. It has only been in the last half of the last century that we have realized the adverse effects of commercial whaling, chemical contamination, acoustic pollution, overfishing, by-catch, and human disturbance. And then there is climate change. For the first time in history, dolphin species are disappearing due to human impacts.

Nature will pull through any human-induced devastation and absorb the combined damage from everything we can muster against it. Some new balance will occur in which we will likely not be present. This may happen regardless of any human blip in our planetary history. But today we are the dominant species on Earth, with the capacity to change our ways. And it would be a sad and disappointing legacy if we didn't reverse the frightening upsurge of anthropogenic issues that are pushing nature, as we know it, to the limit.

Changes

The natural world of my childhood, the world where I first met dolphins, is not the same world that I live in today. Maybe it's always the case with each passing generation that the world we are born into necessarily changes as we grow older, but now the natural spaces are not just shrinking, they are disappearing. And I wonder how far back we'll need to turn the clock to even remember what was here before we developed it.

Real changes must happen now to protect the collective future of the dolphins and the oceans. But what changes? We need effective ocean protection, and to get that, we'll need to see ourselves as integral parts of a grand natural system. Education, and more specifically environmental education, can help us to attain that goal..“Environmentalism is not an option like choosing one's religion or political affiliation,” my husband wrote in his recent book [*The Failure of Environmental Education: And How we Can Fix It*](#). Charlie, like me, grew up with a passion for nature that changed later on in life into a commitment to act in protecting our vanishing wildness.

I don't want to seem overly simplistic. To save the oceans we'll need more than just passion and education. We already have sound science on our side, but we need tangible, measurable, conservation-oriented actions. We need the efforts of scientists, policy makers, economists, sociologists, and politicians... all of us working together, even if this means getting outside our comfort zone.

I am often asked how one person can make a difference. This is a complex question but 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. One can simply start by picking up an issue of interest, then work to involve other people to impact the political process. We need to build a stronger sense of stewardship within our communities and shape the direction in which decisions about our world are made.

As I write in my new book [*Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist*](#):
"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."



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Maddalena Bearzi has studied the ecology and conservation of marine mammals for over twenty years. She is Director of the [Los Angeles Dolphin Project](#) in California, cofounder of the [Ocean Conservation Society](#), and coauthor of [*Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins*](#). Her most recent book is called [*Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist*](#) (Chicago University Press, 2012).

[*Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist*](#) is available on Amazon.

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