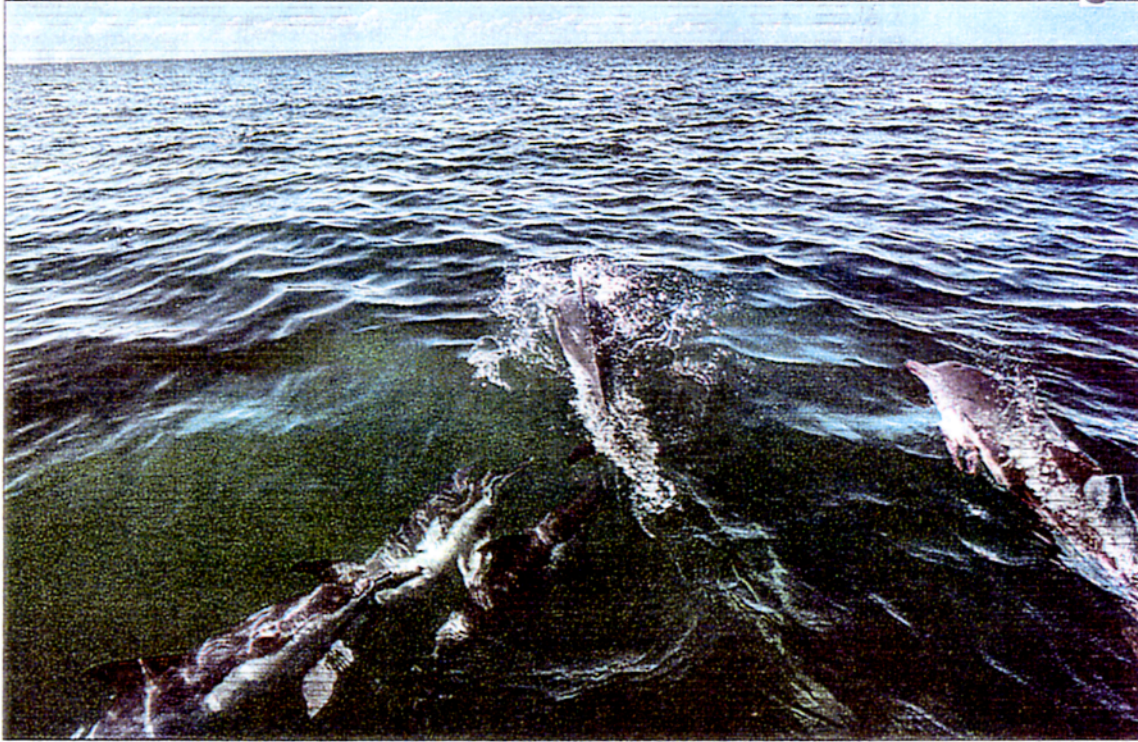


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Common dolphins head out to sea after a feeding frenzy on a school of mackerel.

Tailing Flipper

GINA PICCALO
Westside Weekly

The wake of the dolphin research boat is one of the only signs of movement along the coast this time of morning. It's early enough that fishermen still crowd the Venice Pier to compete with hungry pelicans skimming the calm waters for breakfast.

The L.A. Dolphin Project's four-member crew is silent, their eyes trained on the placid water in search of dolphins.

After nearly 10 minutes spent cruising the shoreline, the boat reaches Malibu when volunteer researcher Paul Ahuja breaks the reverie.

"Here!" he says, pointing to four bottlenose dolphins, their smooth bodies crisscrossing one another's path as they take turns to surface and dive.

Suddenly, everyone on the boat is alert and moving.

small vessel around to catch up with the group of cetaceans, keeping a safe distance from them.

Research project founder Maddalena Bearzi positions herself with a camera and starts snapping pictures and dictating to graduate student Andrea Bachman, who types Bearzi's observations into a laptop computer.

Meanwhile, the dolphins are taking turns slapping their bodies on the water, gearing up for a breakfast run.

"Back head slap," Bearzi said, dictating behavior. "There are two young individuals. One has a fish in his mouth."

This fluid coordination — exciting to a first-time observer — has become a Monday-morning routine for the volunteer members of the L.A. Dolphin Project, the first long-term study of the dolphin population in the Santa Monica Bay.

For the last 18 months, crews have doc-

First long-term study counts dolphins in Santa Monica Bay



L.A. Dolphin Project Director Maddalena Bearzi, left, of Marina del Rey and research assistants Jennifer Bass and Paul Ahuja of Venice are on alert for dolphins in the Santa Monica Bay. The population of dolphins works as a barometer for the health of the bay.