

Italian biologist bonds with L.A. dolphins

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From CNN Correspondent Siobhan Darrow

[LOS ANGELES](#) (CNN) -- When several species of dolphins took up residence in the Santa Monica Bay in recent years, few Angelinos seemed to notice.

But Maddalena Bearzi, another newcomer to greater Los Angeles, was determined to learn all she could about the sophisticated sea mammals.

"I thought it was really weird that in a city like L.A. nobody ever really started a long-term study in this bay," said the Italian marine biologist.

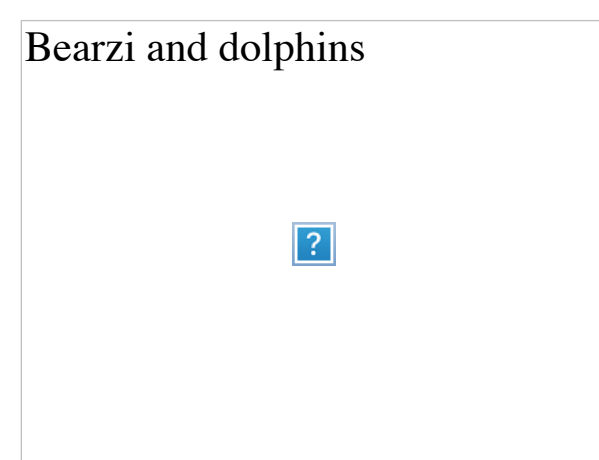
"People don't even know they can see dolphins from the shore."

Bearzi decided to study the mammals and started the Los Angeles Dolphin Project. Along with her husband and volunteer graduate students, she goes out at least once a week to track the dolphins.

The subjects sometimes muddle the question of who observes whom. "They'll turn their heads and they're looking right at you," graduate student Andrea Bachman said. "So there's something that feels like they are studying us too."

Project members have taken more than 15,000 photos of the dolphins, documenting how the animals spend their days.

Bearzi has been surprised by how much the dolphins socialize. They often hang out with other water mammals, like sea lions.



Bearzi tracks dolphins in the Los Angeles area

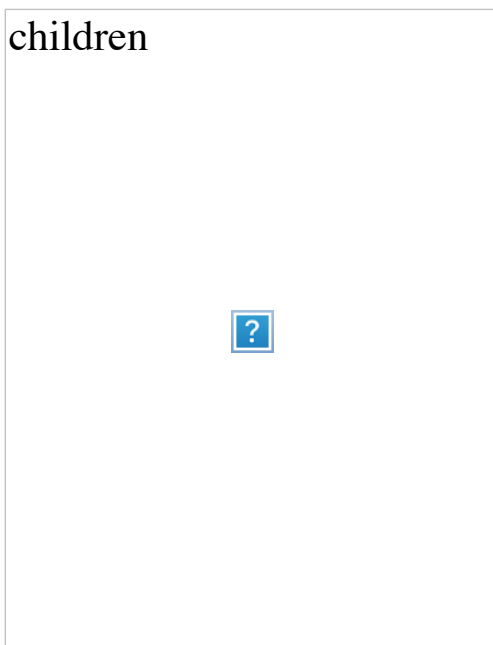
"I think they have a really great life, actually. They travel. They socialize. They feed. They rest," she said.

As coastal creatures, the dolphins feel the impact of human activity, making them a barometer for the health of the bay.

The project hopes to educate the public about threats to the animals by taking schoolchildren out for a firsthand look at the dolphins.

Introducing the next generation to their marine neighbors could be the key to the dolphins' survival.

"It's important to know how we can help the environment in the Santa Monica Bay, and how we influence it, especially the animals in there," student Ehsaan Mesghali said.



The project is meant to educate the public about threats to the animals by taking schoolchildren out for a firsthand look at the dolphins

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