

DOLPHINS

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Two feet below him, two bottlenose dolphins were "bow riding," or crisscrossing, just in front of the moving boat.

Shawn is among six honor students from Culver City Middle School who are helping UCLA researcher Maddalena Bearzi count and study dolphins in Santa Monica Bay.

Although only the honors students will be able to assist Bearzi on several trips throughout the year, every seventh-grader at the school will get an opportunity to study dolphins up close on a class field trip on a bigger boat in May.

SCIENTIFIC METHODS

Alderson said she is pleased the dolphin field trips are now as much a part of the seventh-grade experience at Culver City Middle School as the Pythagorean theorem, the rise and fall of the Roman Empire and hepatitis B vaccination shots.

"This age range needs outdoor education," she said. "We live in Southern California, the ocean is here, so all

FYI

To learn more about the L.A. Dolphin Project, call (310) 822-5205.

the marine life can be studied firsthand."

The children say they couldn't agree more.

"They're pretty and interesting and they make amazing sounds," Molly Wyant, 12, said of the dolphins.

"There's still so much people are trying to learn [about dolphins], things we don't know about behavior, population, communication. I thought I could uncover something new."

Alderson accompanies the children on the trip to teach them about how sonar technology was developed when scientists studied the dolphins' elocution ability; and about the scientific method of inquiry and observation, as defined by Aristotle, Charles Darwin and Carolus Linnaeus.

Each child has a function on the boat.

"Behavioral mode?" biologist researcher Karyn Jones yells to the children after the group spots a pair of bottlenose dolphins close to the Santa Monica Pier.

"Traveling!" replies Penelope Yates, 13.

Jones enters the information in a laptop computer database, then yells, "Group formation?"

"Tight!" replies Christina Pryharski, 12, as head researcher Bearzi snaps a photograph of each dolphin's fin.

A little later, the boat comes upon another pod of dolphins, ritualistically slapping their tails and blowing air out their holes.

"Physical contact?" Jones asks.

"Mating!" Bearzi responds.

Shawn then adds his two cents by saying, "It's dolphin porn!"

The children and researchers go through this drill with each pod of dolphins they sight.

"The notches on the dolphin's dorsal fin are like a human fingerprint. When they are born, it is smooth, but over



PHOTOS BY BRYAN McLELLAN / WESTSIDE WEEKLY

Maddalena Bearzi, director of the L.A. Dolphin Project, gives students an overview of work in marine biology.

their lives, they interact with each other, [get] shark bites [and hit] rocks [and] it creates a unique edge," Bearzi said.

As part of the doctorate program at UCLA, Bearzi has been taking population surveys of dolphins in Santa Monica Bay weekly since 1995, as well as conducting tours and helping raise environmental awareness.

SHIFTING POPULATION

Each time the boat goes out, there's something to see in the bay, Bearzi said.

At any given time, there are between two and three traveling dolphin pods in the 460-square-kilometer bay, and each pod can contain anywhere from five to 25 dolphins, frolicking and moving at an average of 4.5 knots, she said.

Although that means there are usually fewer than 100 dolphins in the bay at any given time, there is one pod of 180 dolphins that moves from San Diego to Monterey and back, frequently lingering in the bay for weeks at a time to feed, Bearzi said.

The two most popular

types of dolphins in the bay are the gray-white-and-black bottlenose, which are 12 to 13 feet long at adulthood and prefer the sardine- and anchovy-rich waters closer to shore, and the gray common dolphin, which averages 6 feet in length and prefers the bay's deeper, squid- and mackerel-rich waters.

Since she began her observations, Bearzi said she has noticed a marine census shift.

A few years ago, there used to be plenty of Risso's dolphins, but the cetacean with the large, blunt head and no beak has disappeared from the bay completely, Bearzi said.

And the once healthy population of Pacific white-sided dolphins now make only rare appearances, she said.

But porpoises, which couldn't be found anywhere in the bay, are now sighted on every trip by the research team, Bearzi said.

"It's probably got to do with shifting food population from the El Nino winter," said Charley Saylan, Bearzi's husband and the boat's captain.

Besides counting the cetaceans for her degree, Bearzi hopes to document the dolphin population for use in passing environmental protection laws.

Many environmentalists think that ocean pollution is causing the worldwide dolphin population to decrease, although the total worldwide population is unknown.

Students aboard the L.A. Dolphin Project boat have picked up the environmental concern from Bearzi and their teacher, while getting a chance to see dolphins outside of an aquarium, on television, in a book or on the Internet.

"Maybe one student will become a marine biologist or an environmentalist," Bearzi said. "That would be a success for us."



Seventh-grader Shawn Ballentine watches for wildlife as the L.A. Dolphin Project boat traverses Santa Monica Bay.