



Beautiful Minds
By Maddalena Bearzi and
Craig B. Stanford
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Dolphins and great apes would seem to have little in common. Dolphins are aquatic, smooth-skinned, sonar-directed and handless, while great apes are jungle-dwelling, hairy, visually guided and dextrous. Yet Maddalena Bearzi and Craig Stanford's delightful book points out a host of fascinating similarities.

Legends abound from across the ages of the selfless courage and intelligence of dolphins. There are numerous tales of them saving people from drowning or shark attacks. Indeed, Bearzi reduced me to tears in a passage in which she described following a group of dolphins that

surrounded a young woman in the throes of drowning during a suicide attempt.

The reputation of great apes has a more chequered past. Early

white hunters insisted that gorillas were vicious beasts that attacked without provocation. The directors of *King Kong* were appalled when audiences felt sympathy for the giant ape. They blamed RKO Pictures for removing sequences such as when Kong not only stamped on a villager but also twisted his foot back and forth. Yet, as Dian Fossey showed in her study of wild gorillas, these are gentle creatures that charge only in defence of their family. With the advent of flower power, the pendulum of opinion shifted and great apes began to be presented as gentle vegetarians.

Modern field studies of wild apes and dolphins have shown them not to be vicious beasts or saintly hippies, but complex and socially Machiavellian creatures. Both chimpanzees and dolphins live in fission-fusion societies in which subgroups will come together for short periods of time before parting to form new groups. Such a society allows for clever political manoeuvring involving complex alliance formation and deception.

Bearzi and Stanford are leading dolphin and chimpanzee researchers, but nevertheless they let down their scientific guard to share with the reader their passion for these enigmatic creatures. In clear straightforward prose they

outline major scientific findings relating to social behaviour, communication, cultural learning and problem-solving. In the final chapter, they voice their great concern for the survival of apes and cetaceans.

In 2006, the Yangtze River dolphin was pronounced extinct. Only 300 right whales and 224 harbour porpoises survive today. If we are not harpooning or drowning them in our fishing nets, we are choking their ocean home. There are an estimated 46,000 pieces of plastic floating at or near the surface of every square mile of ocean. Great apes are not only rapidly losing their jungle habitats, but they are also being killed and eaten in the bush meat trade. The rate of devastation is most critical for the orang-utan. Their forests are being flattened by bulldozers to make way for palm oil plantations.

I must admit, I usually shy away from reading such statistics of environmental doom because I feel helpless in the face of them. However, by the time I reached the final chapter of *Beautiful*

Minds I was so charmed that I felt compelled to read on. Bearzi and Stanford's book has the capacity to delight, entertain, educate, evoke compassion and, I hope, galvanise people into action.

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