

# Dolphin Tales

*Marine scientist Maddalena Bearzi discusses the local dolphin population and her new book “Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist” that chronicles a life dedicated to these intelligent animals.*



Photo Pat Reynolds

## What brought about this book?

**Bearzi:** The idea was to share my experiences as a marine biologist who’s spent over 20-years with dolphins, whales and many other creatures. Over the years, I’ve had so many people who have come to me saying, “Oh my God, it must be so wonderful studying dolphin...” [Lots of people] fantasize about working with dolphins in the wild – with this book I want to give the reader a down-to-earth, simple and candid view of what it means to work with these animals. Not only take them into my world as a marine scientist and have them understand more about marine mammal behavior and the risk there are now facing, but also highlight some of the frustrations, creativity and joy that make up dolphin research.

## Why did you call it “confessions” of a Field Biologist? Why confessions?

**Bearzi:** [Laughs] The book talks about real life - my real life – as a woman and as a scientist. To grow up as a female scientist in my country [Italy] at the time wasn’t always easy. I speak about the ups and downs of life in and out of the field. It’s a window into my personal thoughts – including my insecurities. It’s basically the story of a young curious, naïve, ocean-lover that turned her passion into a science career and, later on, in the defense of these magnificent creatures.

## Do you think the public has a realistic understanding of dolphins?

**Bearzi:** Some people think about dolphins as these “happy” creatures because they have a “smiling” face, but the problem with that is people think they are always happy, even when they are in a tank in an aquarium. That’s not the case. As I narrate in my first book (Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins), these animals are large-brained creatures, they live in complex societies, they have strong bonds, and they move over a large range in the ocean. They are, in many ways, similar to us and they can’t be constrained in small tanks.

## You mostly focus on bottlenose dolphin but do you ever see bottlenose and common dolphins interact?

**Bearzi:** Yeah, you can find mixed schools, especially with the offshore bottlenose. One time I saw a common dolphin sort of “adopted” by a

school of bottlenose dolphins. Ordinarily, the behavior between the two is very different, but this common was behaving just like a bottlenose – moving slower and had adapted the feeding techniques of the bottlenose. It was quite interesting.

## In your years of studying these local animals what discoveries have you made?

**Bearzi:** A few years ago, here in Santa Monica Bay, we discovered that California sea lions were clearly “taking advantage” of the echolocating ability of dolphins to find food. Another discovery was that scientists along the California coast always thought that inshore and offshore bottlenose populations were completely separate, but through our photo ID work we showed that it wasn’t completely true. And there was also our study of skin diseases here. It was the first study of skin disease on the west coast and it raised a lot of attention. There were researchers from all over the world calling me saying, “we’re seeing the same!” It’s interesting because the presence of these skin diseases is at least partially related to the presence of pollutants in our waters. When you see these kinds of issues with dolphins, it’s something that we’re, in a way, facing too – we eat [some of the] the same food...

## When you’re conducting your studies, do you get in the water with them or observe from a boat?

**Bearzi:** I am a scuba diver but I don’t go underwater with dolphins. I always try to respect the dolphins’ environment and disturb them as little as possible. I think there a lot of problems today with “swim with the dolphin programs” and things like that and, as a scientist, I would like to give a good example to the public. I have a permit that allows me to legally go close to animals to conduct photo-identification and behavioral studies. We shoot photos, video, and collect all different kinds of data including environmental and oceanographic information, but we always try to conduct our research disturbing dolphins and whales as less as possible.

## After all of these years, do these dolphin recognize you?

**Bearzi:** That’s a difficult question. When I first started studying these animals, I vowed to view them as a group – as the object of a study,

but the more I studied them the more I realized that they are really individuals with their own personalities and emotions. They’re very socially complex, intelligent, emotional beings, which we should learn to respect a lot more than we have in the past.

## How do you conclude that they’re “emotional beings”?

**Bearzi:** There are many things that you observe when you spend lots of time with these animals. For instance, if you look at the compassion of a mother in taking care of her calf – it really reminds you of a human mother with a child – it’s very compelling. Or how dolphins can mourn for other individuals. The more time you spend with these animals, and I’ve spent thousands of hours in the water, the more you’ll understand how close they are to us. Years ago, when Jane Goodall came out speaking about how similar we are to chimps, many people were shocked, but now it’s far more accepted. It’s the same with dolphins – as we learn more, we’re seeing more and more similarities between them and us.

## Is it possible to scientifically define a species as emotional?

**Bearzi:** Yeah, this is something I talk about in the new book “Dolphin Confidential” as well as in my first book “Beautiful Minds”. It’s difficult defining even our own emotion – what is love? What is pain? It’s all very



Photo courtesy of Ocean Conservation Society

Dr. Maddalena Bearzi conducting field research.

personal, but after spending so much time in the field observing them, you can’t deny that they feel emotion. But this is still a subject of controversy among scientists...

## Do some of your colleagues dismiss this notion?

**Bearzi:** Some do dismiss it but there are many that are embracing this way to see things. There are a lot of people working, trying to shed light about these animals and I think we always have to be open minded.

## When it comes to conservation what is your main message?

**Bearzi:** I’m hoping that people can become more informed, passionate and compassionate about these creatures and we need to do something to protect them. Awareness is not enough; we need action, and we need it now! We also need to spend more time outside disconnecting ourselves from computers and iPhones. I hope that the book will help people view the ocean and marine life with more respect and build a stewardship ethic that is so greatly needed right now.

*Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist is published by Chicago University Press and it's available on Amazon.com and most book stores.*

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