



Scientist Addresses Risks to Dolphins

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Maddalena Bearzi, whose research on worldwide dolphin populations revealed remarkable similarities with humans, discussed how human actions have negatively affected oceans and increased the likelihood of dolphin extinction Friday, at a lecture and signing for her recently published book.

“Sometimes I get asked if dolphins survive in polluted areas,” Bearzi said Friday night to a packed lecture hall at the Harvard Museum of Natural History. “The answer is, no they don’t. That’s why we need to take care of our oceans. My research is taking a more conservation-oriented approach because I believe that we don’t have the luxury anymore to just do research on these animals.”

Bearzi told the audience that her travels and encounters with creatures of the sea convinced her of the majesty of the ocean, particularly an encounter with a blue whale.

“I remember the blowhole of the whale was the size of my caddy cabin—I felt as small as a toothpick,” Bearzi said. “Just imagine, a small child could walk on one of the arteries of this animal, its heart is as big as my Mini Cooper!”

To the budding field biologists in the audience, Bearzi spoke to gender stereotypes and other adversities she overcame while starting her career in Italy.

“I wanted to study animal behavior in the field, but it wasn’t always easy or proper, for that matter,” Bearzi said. “We Italians can be just a tiny bit conservative, and for many people, a woman’s place was in the kitchen rather than out in the field studying large animals.”

However, even when Bearzi got the job, she realized the field wasn’t as glamorous as she had imagined.

“I had been on a research sailboat only once, and guess what? I got seasick,” Bearzi lamented. “So my romantic idea to be out at sea, following dolphins, suddenly clashed with the reality of being green and nauseous.”

She eventually overcame her seasickness, and, on one occasion, was a party to the rescue of a dying woman. A school of dolphins she had been studying led her team directly to the woman, leading Bearzi to wonder about the heroic aspect often attributed to animals.

“Many scientists don’t believe that dolphins can save you because there isn’t enough hard scientific evidence, but that day, those dolphins brought us to save that girl,” Bearzi said. “Was that a coincidence? I’m still wondering about that today.”

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But without intervention, Bearzi pointed out, the rapidly-declining population of dolphins may soon go extinct.

“Each of us has a say in the future of dolphins, of whales, and the oceans, and our own species,” she said. “And I do believe that exercising that say is our chance for greatness, perhaps our last chance.”

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