

Look Into This Dolphin's Eyes and Tell Me That's Not Grief!

July 15, 2016

By Maddalena Bearzi

Although we live thousands of miles and an ocean apart, my brother Giovanni and I share not only the same bloodline but also a passion for dolphins. For more than two decades, both of us have conducted scientific and conservation research on marine mammals in the wild; Gio in the waters of Croatia, Italy and Greece, and I, mostly off the California coast. Over the years, we've traded opinions and observations regarding the animals and oceans we care so much about.

Spending thousands of hours at sea in company of dolphins, we have both learned about the everyday complex social existence of these large-brained aquatic mammals. Many of the behaviors that we have recorded were distinctive to animals perfectly adapted to a medium so different from ours. At times, however, we have been lucky enough to witness facets of these animals' social lives that closely remind us of our own human existence. The experiences of my brother, his research crew and a group of students on the afternoon of June 9, 2016 is one of those touching instances of how dolphins and humans share some of the same emotions.

Since 2009, Gio and his research team have been working in the Gulf of Corinth, Greece, studying striped dolphins, short-beaked common dolphins, common bottlenose dolphins and, until now, one Risso's dolphin. Striped dolphins have been by far the most abundant species in the area and the team has spent hundreds of hours observing them from small powerboats.

On June 9, the research day started as usual, waking up early in the morning and prepping gear to head out at sea in search of cetaceans. This time, joining my brother's crew on two research boats were Dr. Bernd Würsig (one of the most eminent cetologists in the world), Gio's partner and co-worker Silvia Bonizzoni, and a group of students from Texas A&M University, all eager to participate in a Marine Biology Field Course abroad.



THE DOLPHIN BIOLOGY & CONSERVATION TEAM RECORDING DATA ON THE GRIEVING DOLPHIN FROM ONE OF THEIR RESEARCH BOATS. PHOTOGRAPH BY GIOVANNI BEARZI.

Lavinia Eddy, one of Gio's fine research assistants, clearly remembers that day. "We were looking for striped dolphins here in the Gulf," she says, "and at some point we sighted an adult striped dolphin with another dead dolphin". She recalls how their boat slowly and carefully approached the two dolphins, trying not to interfere but at the same time attempting to observe the situation. One individual was indeed dead, laying belly-up on the surface of the still waters of the Gulf.



A STRIPED DOLPHIN GRIEVING IN THE GULF OF CORINTH, GREECE. PHOTOGRAPH BY SILVIA BONIZZONI.

“It seemed like the other one was trying to move (the corpse) in a certain direction,” said one of the Texas A&M students chronicling the event. “It was fascinating to see how the dolphin swam in a circle around (the dead body), pushing it up, even pushing itself on the top of the dead dolphin...”. It looked like the individual was attempting to flip the corpse over, perhaps in the hope of giving the companion the chance for another breath of air.

“And you can see the eyes, and the side of the body...” the student re-counts with a sad expression “and how he went back under the water... swimming, then making another circle around...”

There was no doubt in anyone’s mind aboard the research vessel that what they were witnessing was grieving. They all saw it, they all felt the struggle, the gravity of the situation, and the sadness of the moment.

“For a pelagic creature like this is so highly unusual (to be alone with a dead one, and away from its group),” says Dr. Würsig who has spent most of his life observing dolphins’ behavior in different places around the world, “because they are scared to be alone... they are just not lone creatures.”

“This animal is obviously suffering,” he murmurs while watching the scene that is sorrowfully unfolding in front of him. To Dr. Würsig, this seems like grieving, and he stresses that these are large brained and bright animals that are very behaviorally flexible so, presumably, they know that their loved one is dead, that it’s gone, but they don’t want to accept that realization... they don’t want to believe it. This is something that we humans can easily understand, and relate to.

Epimeletic behavior, which involves giving of care or attention to another individual, is not new in the animal world and has been observed in several free-ranging species such as cetaceans, seals, manatees, elephants and giraffes. Scientists called it “nurturant” when displayed toward a young individual, and “succurant” if addressed to a companion in distress. A recent [review study](#) looking into nurturant behavior in dolphins and several other wild marine and terrestrial mammals validates the idea that adults mourning their dead young is “a common and globally widespread behavior in long-lived and highly sociable species”.

“I observed and heard report about epimeletic behavior by bottlenose dolphins in other study areas in Croatia and Greece,” my brother tells me after sending me photos of the grieving dolphin and this heart-rending [video](#), “but it was mostly an adult dolphin (likely the mother) carrying her dead calf.” In this recent case, what my brother finds interesting is that the grieving involved striped dolphins, a pelagic and highly gregarious species. To his knowledge, this is the first documented case of epimeletic behavior of a striped dolphin. “Additionally,” he tells me, “the dead animal – a female – wasn’t a calf, although she seemed to be somewhat smaller than the adult (technically, we would call her a subadult). We have no idea whether it was a mother mourning for her grown-up daughter, or an adult grieving over a smaller companion. What was evident to anyone present on our two boats is that the living animal was in great distress.”

And there was something else that got my brother’s attention.

“In examining our high-resolution photos, we noticed that in all our images, the living individual looks only at the dead one and never looks up. Dolphins lack muscles to control their facial expression, but the eyes often reveal their emotions. Close-ups of the eyes of the grieving individual convey a feeling of suffering, and while this interpretation may be seen as anthropomorphic, feelings of grieving are not uniquely human. Indeed, we share these feelings with a number of other species (elephants, among others, are well known for their grieving behavior).”

My brother and I can’t agree more on this point. We humans are intelligent and emotional beings, but we are not the only ones feeling emotions on this planet.

The video [“Grieving Striped Dolphins”](#) was filmed by Giovanni Bearzi and Bernd Würsig; photos in the video are by Silvia Bonizzoni. For more information about this and other research projects by Dolphin Biology and Conservation: www.dolphinbiology.org

Maddalena Bearzi has studied the ecology and conservation of marine mammals for over twenty-five years. She is President and Co-founder of the [Ocean Conservation Society](#), and Co-author of [Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins](#) (Harvard University Press, 2008; paperback 2010). She also works as photojournalist and blogger for several publications. Her most recent book is [Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist](#) (Chicago University Press, 2012; paperback 2016).

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MEET THE AUTHOR

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