

MADDALENA BEARZI



## MY FIRST MENTOR

*With a helping hand from an eccentric guide,  
a young scientist discovered the natural wonders of Italy.*

As a young girl, I had many dreams. Being in the wild, exploring the behavior of large African carnivores, was one of them. But growing up in Italian cities, and not wealthy, I attuned my reverie to something closer to home — and true to life. A variety of animals, from dogs to hamsters, down the evolutionary scale to frogs, tortoises, lizards, and snakes, occupied my parents' backyard, my room, and part of my time. With a notebook and pencil, I wrote about the habits of my nonhuman furry and scaly friends, sketching their shapes and forms with the naiveté of my age.

Back then, my silent “mentors” were books: of nature and naturalists, of voyages, of imaginary and extraordinary worlds.

Among them were Charles Darwin, E.O. Wilson, Niko Tinbergen, Joy Adamson, Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carlson, and Jules Verne. Page after page, I learned something about ecology and the bestiary that surrounded me, and I vicariously traveled to wild and fantastic places. By reading, I learned how to write a little, too, something that came in handy first as a means of support, and later on, as a way

to share with others my passion for nature and the need to protect our planet.

The summer months of my youth were different. On the primeval coasts of Sardinia, where my parents; brother, Gio; and I spent our vacations, I could be one with nature. Swimming in a sea teeming with life, unrestrictedly running along unspoiled shores, or hiking the hills nearby along with flocks of sheep, I experienced freedom. The fond scent of those summers still follows me to this day.

As the years went by, my call to the wild grew stronger. The university taught me about natural science on paper, but schooling alone felt arid to me. It wasn't enough; I needed to dip into the outside world, away from the cement and concrete of buildings and streets.

As a freelance photojournalist in my early 20s, I scraped together what little money I had — just enough to travel frugally. By bike, on foot, hitchhiking, or in my Fiat 500 jampacked with gear to the roof, I sought nature. As a student seeking a worthwhile topic for my bachelor's thesis in anything field-based and ethology-related (not popular things to pursue in the old-fashioned Padua University I attended), I met Manuel.

With long hair tied in a ponytail, muddy trekking shoes, a patchouli oil-infused shirt, and a backpack glued to his brawny shoulders, Manuel was the epitome of a field naturalist. He was what I wanted to be: a free spirit untethered by a 9-to-5 job and no boss to report to, drifting around the world to find wilderness. Traveling in his rusty camper filled with nature guidebooks — which served as his home base while in Italy — I listened to stories of faraway African adventures (those I was still dreaming about). I never wondered how he actually made a living other than the occasional, small, part-time biologist jobs at the University of



Maddalena Bearzi holds a lizard (*Podarcis sicula campestris*) in the reserve of Arnino in Tuscany, Italy, to study the species in 1986. © Maddalena Bearzi.

Parma, and I didn't care. Somehow it worked for him, and somehow, I thought, it was going to work for me.

Back then, nature — even close to home — was still *wild*. Together, binoculars around our necks and heavy sweaters to keep warm in the morning dew, Manuel and I tagged migratory pigeons and the copious avifauna of Sardinia. On the Italian mainland, we hiked mountains from one region to the next to identify sparrows, owls, birds of prey, and swifts. We searched for venomous snakes and counted the sand martins emerging from their nests along the Emilia Romagna riverbanks. Slowly, my untrained mind started to tune in to the surrounding nature; I began to recognize sounds, and to smell with my eyes closed. Gradually, I became less focused on large African carnivores and valued more the nearby wilderness. Manuel was no Buddhist monk, but he taught me how little was needed to be joyful. And I was happy, indeed.

With him, my mind opened and my wings spread. He was my first mentor.

Soon after, life took me over 6,000 miles away from Manuel, my family, and my country. New domains, different mentors, love, and other passions awaited. I traveled often, studying sea turtles in Mexico, and dolphins and whales in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. And I landed in Los Angeles, which I now call home.

When the pandemic arrived a few years ago and my marine mammal research off California halted because of social distancing and lack of funding, I attuned to the wild in my backyard and my neighborhood. Unhurriedly, I rediscovered what Georges Perec calls the *infra-ordinaire* — that everyday habitual and at the same time astonishing natural world that most of us forget is there, even within a city teeming with millions of people. Walking my mutt, Genghis, in a 3-mile radius from my home and observing squirrels, lizards, skunks, raccoons, coyotes, opossums, cottontails, rattlesnakes, hawks, hummingbirds, wasps, and much more, brought back memories of my parents' garden and the small creatures I met there.

My childhood curiosity suddenly reawakened, and I realized that Mother Nature had tossed me a line when the world around me was collapsing. I understood how fortunate I've been to experience what I have experienced, both far away and near home. I realized how much I took for granted and how little I knew about science and nature.

I will always remember Manuel walking in Maremma a few feet ahead of me, suddenly hushing me and pointing to a red fox nearby who halted to look both of us in the eyes. It was truly a breathtaking moment.

**YOUR TURN:** What are your thoughts on this story? Feel free to send us your comments at [editor@phikappaphi.org](mailto:editor@phikappaphi.org). Active members can also join various discussions of *Forum* content at [Link.PhiKappaPhi.org](http://Link.PhiKappaPhi.org).



**MADDALENA BEARZI** is president and co-founder of the Ocean Conservation Society. She holds a doctorate in biology and a postdoctorate from UCLA, and she has been involved in studying marine mammals with a conservation bias since 1990. Bearzi has published several scientific peer-reviewed papers, is co-author of *Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins*, and is author of *Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist* and *Stranded: Finding Nature in Uncertain Times*. Her first children's book, *The Secret Life of a Sea Turtle*, is forthcoming. Bearzi has been a blogger for National Geographic, and she continues to write essays on current environmental issues and wilderness for different media. Born and raised in Italy, she lives in Los Angeles, California, with her husband and dog. Photo by Charlie Saylan.

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Maddalena Bearzi steers the Ocean Conservation Society research boat during a marine mammal survey off southern California in 2014. Bearzi became fascinated with nature while growing up in her native Italy. © Charlie Saylan.



Maddalena Bearzi takes pictures of a coastal bottlenose dolphin bow riding the ocean Conservation Society research boat during a survey off Los Angeles, California, in 2012. © Maddalena Bearzi.