



Toni Frohoff

Ocean Guardian

THIS WILDLIFE BEHAVIOR EXPERT has only lived in Santa Barbara since last spring, but she says that already, people in town know her as the “Dolphin Lady.” The title doesn’t seem to bother her. She herself jokes she has an “obsessive-compulsive dolphin disorder.” And indeed, it was dolphins that caused her to relocate here, specifically to study coastal bottlenose dolphins—the sleek marine mammals we’re likely to see coursing through the waves when we’re strolling on the beach. She now works out of her cozy downtown office, which serves as the headquarters for TerraMar Research, the nonprofit she organized to study and protect wildlife and their environment.

Though Frohoff had lived on Bainbridge Island, near Seattle,

for the last 15 years, she is no stranger to Southern California. A trim, honey-blond 46-year-old, she grew up “a city girl, very urban,” she says, in the Los Angeles area. Her family wasn’t particularly oriented toward nature, she remembers. She encountered dolphins in the wild as a teenager when she was learning to surf in the Santa Monica Bay and she realized what she’d been missing. “When I discovered nature and the ocean, a whole new world opened up to me,” she recalls.

She has made that realm her life’s focus, beginning with undergraduate work at UC Los Angeles and Loyola Marymount University, then moving to Texas A&M for graduate studies in wildlife and fisheries management and a PhD in behavioral biology. For more than 20 years, Frohoff has traveled the world, studying swim-with-dolphin programs in captivity and in the wild as well as other human/whale interactions, looking at solitary cetaceans (beluga whales, for example) and pioneering research on dolphin well-being and conservation. She is a cofounder (along with Gray Bradshaw) and faculty affiliate of the Trans-Species Institute of Learning, which shares the TerraMar office in Santa Barbara and is an educational center with a mission to “facilitate learning and well-being across species, communities, cultures, and environments.”

As for the coastal bottlenose dolphins, Frohoff is quick to acknowledge that others are studying them farther north and south, but there’s a gap on what’s happening near Santa Barbara and Ventura, which is the epicenter for this small population of marine mammals.

To fill that need, she has created POD (Protect Our Dolphins), a nonprofit community program that includes a study and research component for dolphin psychology and ecology. “We look at the lives of dolphins here as members of a population and also as individuals,” says Frohoff. That means beginning with photo identifications on the water and gaining insight into their behaviors such as how they spend their time and with whom—whether other dolphins or surfers, for example. “We eavesdrop acoustically and visually.” But not intrusively, she adds, emphasizing that dolphins come under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which makes it a federal offense to observe them too closely without a permit from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The coastal bottlenose dolphin population has remained stable over the last two decades, but from going through preliminary research, one observation stands out: Instead of average groups of about 20 dolphins, locally, “we’re seeing group size of nine individu-

als, or maybe even just five or six," she says. "That's very serious," because as she knows from her in-depth studies of dolphin behavior, the diminished groups affect the animals' culture and psychology. "We need to know what's happening with the population."

Helping in that effort is a diverse group of experts and advisers—scientists, artists, and students, from Karen Lee Stevens of All for Animals and Michael Smith of Gray Whales Count, to Captain Fred Benko of Condor Cruises, art gallery owner Kim Kieler, Pheobe Green Linden of the Trans-Species Institute of Learning, and local sculptor Bud Bottoms, whose dolphin statue at the entrance to Stearns Wharf is a Santa Barbara



Frohoff conducting underwater research with an untrained wild dolphin in the United Kingdom.

icon and the inspiration for a new jewelry line he designed to benefit POD.

"Many scientists feel we have to be advocates for the animals," she says passionately. "How can we not? We have an opportunity to intervene by supporting dolphins in the environment we share. That can be empowering for the whole community." Such networking will ensure healthy future generations, both dolphin and human. "It's key to our survival." ■

SAVE THE DATE for Protect Our Dolphins' first annual winter gala—**"The Launching of POD of Santa Barbara: Sharing the New Year with Our Dolphin Neighbors"** in January at the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum, 113 Harbor Way, Santa Barbara, 805-962-8404, sbmm.org. For more information, visit protectourdolphins.com.

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