



Stopper of the slaughter



Author scientist and protector of the dolphins Diana Reiss speaks at Moses Znaimer's annual ideacity conference in Toronto

By Antonia Zerbisias

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You could call Diana Reiss The Dolphin Whistler.

A cognitive psychologist and professor at Hunter College and the Biopsychology and Behavioral Neuroscience Graduate Program of CUNY, she is also a research scientist at the National Aquarium of Baltimore and at the Smithsonian National Zoo in Washington, D.C.

Her love and life's work are dolphins, which is why she was scientific adviser to the Oscar-winning documentary *The Cove*.

In September, her new book *The Dolphin in the Mirror: Exploring Dolphin Minds and Saving Dolphin Lives* will be published. This week she speaks at Moses Znaimer's annual ideacity conference in Toronto.

We reached her at home in New York. This is an edited version of that interview.

Your book takes a down-to-sea-level approach to your research. What is your goal in writing it?

The focus of the book is trying to bring people into my world of trying to understand the minds of dolphins. I've been working with them for over 25 years, exploring the depths of their consciousness and how they think. These are truly magnificent minds. They're highly social, they're about as alien as you can get from us in their body form, and yet so much of their behaviour that we can see is similar to what we do.

So does that explain the reference to mirrors? That we reflect each other?

Dolphins, like us, can recognize themselves in a mirror. They actually care about watching themselves do different activities. The mirror has potential information there. It depends on how you interpret that — but it also depends on if you care enough to even look. Most animals, if they care enough to look, never figure out it's themselves. The idea that an animal other than humans can understand that something outside of itself has to do with them, that external image is actually them, is actually quite remarkable. It's rare in the animal world.

You seem to have a more intuitive approach to your research than what one would expect.

I am trying to understand these dolphins in their own right. When you get up close and personal with a dolphin, what do you experience, what is that interaction like, how does communication develop? I call the dolphins mentors, or partners, because I'm learning from them. If you allow it

to happen, if you learn how to watch them, and learn how to listen, they'll show you their ways.

Many people have certain approaches where they use food to get dolphins to do things. I prefer to work with them like intelligent creatures and give them things that they find entertaining and interesting and see how they react.

Like toys?

I built this underwater keyboard many years ago. It had three-dimensional visual symbols on it, and if they hit a particular visual form on any of the nine keys, they would hear a particular whistle and then they would get an object. Just like humans, they learn that objects and sounds are associated. It was kind of like a giant vending machine for them. It gave them choice and control.

We were working with two moms and their calves. We started out giving them little fish, or balls, or rubs from us. The youngsters were much more involved with the keyboards. The mothers I think actually used it as a babysitting device. They would relax someplace else in the pool while the babies worked on the keyboard.

Now we're trying to build another one that's a little bit more high-tech.

So how would you define their intelligence?

Dolphins are what I call supreme contingency testers. They spend time exploring. They are very astute at testing you. In general, they are very quick to learn. They're very social and very aware of what's going on around them. These are big brains.

I'm in the presence of a dolphin and it's a very specific presence. When you work up close and personal with them, you realize how strong these personalities are. They can be creative, funny and deceptive, all these things. Often you don't know that until you establish a relationship with them. They're beings. They just don't happen to be human beings.

What is with all those bubbles on the book cover?

Dolphins create their own objects of play, which is pretty remarkable. They blow out these beautiful silver air rings and follow them up.

Once, we were watching seven dolphins: one was in the centre blowing a bubble ring while the others were around her watching as she did it. Then one male went off and got a piece of fish from the bottom of the pool, and placed it in the air ring and the dolphins flipped and got close and watched and watched. So then he went back another piece of fish and put it in the ring. That's very dolphin. They're very aware of what they're doing.

But now you're moving more toward advocacy.

I was one of the first scientists to speak out about dolphin-safe labelling for tuna. We worked together with many environmental groups because it was horribly inhumane what was going on with the dolphins in the tuna nets.

How did you become involved with The Cove?

After I'd done the mirror study in 2001, an old friend of mine who had been documenting these brutal dolphin drives in Japan said you've got to speak out about this. He showed me footage that changed my life. I started working to raise public awareness. I tried working diplomatically with the Japanese government. I started an organization called Act for Dolphins to speak out about this. But nothing was really working.

Finally, at a conference, I met (filmmaker) Louie Psihoyos who said he had money to make a film about the environment. I remember grabbing on to his shirt lapels and saying 'Sit down, you gotta listen to this.'

People pay to see dolphins work for food in marine parks, or swim with them at resorts. Aren't we loving them to death?

There are many aquariums around the world that take dolphins from these drives. We need to apply our science to global policy. That's what I am trying to do now. Dolphins need protection everywhere. I can't not speak out about it on their behalf.

Diana Reiss appears at ideacity on June 16 at 2 p.m. More information is at www.ideacityonline.com

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