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Dr. Denise Herzing

Dolphin Whisperer

Dr. Denise Herzing, research director of the Wild Dolphin Project has completed 30 years of her long-term study of the Atlantic spotted dolphins inhabiting Bahamian waters. She received her B.S. in Marine Zoology in 1979; her M.A. in Behavioral Biology in 1988; and her Ph.D. in Behavioral Biology/Environmental Studies in 1993. She is an affiliate assistant professor in Biological Sciences at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL. In 2008 Dr. Herzing received a Guggenheim Fellowship. She is also a fellow with the Explorers Club, a scientific advisor for the Lifeboat Foundation and the American Cetacean Society, and on the board of Schoolyard Films. In addition to many scientific articles, she is the author of *Dolphin Diaries: My 25 years with Spotted Dolphins in the Bahamas*, and *The Wild Dolphin Project*. Her work with the spotted dolphins has appeared in *National Geographic*, *BBC Wildlife*, *Ocean Realm* and *Sonar* magazines.

What is your first memory? I remember playing in my front yard in the mud. I think I was rolling around naked probably chasing some bug. I remember the neighbors were horrified, but I am not sure if it was because I was all muddy or that I was naked. I think I was three or four years old. **When was the last time you were truly embarrassed?** I was embarrassed just last year, on my research boat, when a colleague asked me what I thought about animal rights and my response was something like “I think all animals should have a right to a natural and healthy life”. Then he pointed out to me how contradictory it was that I was eating meat at dinner. And in a way, he was right. I am trying to eat lower on the food chain, but I can’t say I am a complete vegetarian. I have found it hard in a way since I deal with some other food allergies, like gluten. But it reminded me that we all need to “walk the talk” more carefully and make our actions more consistent with our words. At least we have to continue to try and improve ourselves if we want the world to improve. **What do you consider your greatest professional accomplishment?** My greatest accomplishment has been the ability to stay productively in the field, every summer, and study the same resident group of dolphins in the Bahamas. This involves 4 months of hard field work, raising funds to support the work, publishing scientific papers, keeping a research vessel running, and dealing with weather and hurricane issues. I am proud of keeping the science going year after year and providing insight into the world of a healthy wild dolphin society. However if I am ever really successful at “cracking the code” of their communication, or at least make a dent in that issue, I would consider that my greatest success. **What is one thing you have always wanted to do but have been putting off?** I have always wanted to live in Greece for a few months. I actually wrote part of my book “Dolphin Diaries” on the island of Santorini, in the quaint village called Oia in the lovely Chelidonia Villas. This is a World Heritage Site and has traditional cave homes dug into the side of the volcanic caldera cliffside. I went there during the off-season to write because I feel connected to this place and find the area beautiful and inspiring. I have always wanted to go back there to plant myself for some months perhaps to write another book. This is the one place on the planet where I can recharge my body, mind, and spirit. I even fantasize about buying a place there someday, a little cave apartment of my very own. **Which cause or charity do you most identify with?** That’s a tough one, well mine, The Wild Dolphin Project, is my favorite charity of course, since it focuses on our work with the dolphins. I personally support various animal causes including wildlife issues and animal shelters. Such a small percentage of charity monies go to animal or wildlife causes, so I choose to focus on these causes in my personal philanthropy. **Favorite... Character from fiction:** Spock, from Star Trek. But I am probably just jealous because I have no doubt

we will find life in space, and intelligent life, someday. And I would like to have another life as an exobiologist and explore life on other planets when we discover it. **Invention of the past 10 years:** Wireless Technology. It makes the world a more connected place and makes it harder to hide problems. **Contemporary artist (in the broadest sense of the word):** Patrick Stewart. I really love his work on TV, on the screen, on stage, and I relate and respect much of his philosophy of life. **Curse word:** Crap. Although I probably use a few synonyms of this word too. **Least Favorite... Smell:** Mold **Word:** The “N” word. I hate words used to degrade people. They are repulsive and unacceptable. **Feeling:** Indecision. **Generalization:** You will never be able to do that. With a bit of hard work, imagination, and vision you can do a lot of things. I don’t like it when people discourage others from following their passions or dreams. **What kinds of things keep you up at night?** I worry about the health of the planet and our blatant disregard for nonhuman societies and ecosystems. Sometimes I get overwhelmed watching the news or reading my tweets, about this species going extinct, and that habitat being destroyed, about dogs and cats suffering. I worry that the human species is so focused on the human species that we are destroying everything and everyone else on the planet. **What do you consider the greatest threat currently facing America?** I think environmental degradation and species loss is the greatest threat facing us. Without land, water, and air, and the rest of nature that goes with it, not only the health of these systems but our own health will degrade. Our spirit and connections to the Earth will also degrade and thus goes a healthy society. **How do you define love?** I am not sure I do define love. I think of love as a process on a personal level, on a societal level, on a species level, and on a universal level. I think as a member of the human race, our idea of love has to extend to the natural world and other beings in it, to really experience the larger essence of love. If there was one sentence I might use to “define” love in human terms, I would say that “Love is letting someone be themselves”. I would also extend that to other species and say the “Love is letting every being reach its natural and maximum potential to be itself.”