

Farewell to an old dolphin friend



TOM LYONS 22 Oct 2015

In 1993, the year after I moved to Sarasota, I wrote about a dolphin that approached my boat in Sarasota Bay and swam nearby for a while.

Keeping wild dolphins safe from humans requires not doing some things people like to do. Feeding them is a bad idea, as is fishing near them. Both can make dolphins become too attracted to humans and associate them with food, which can sooner or later get them hooked or tangled or even cut with a boat propeller.

But whenever a dolphin approaches my sailboat and swims nearby for a while without any such encouragement, I feel honored. Whether they are curious or just passing by and ignoring me, it is always delightful. Dolphins are a local treasure.

That one I met in 1993 was especially memorable. It had a startlingly distinctive dorsal fin I described as looking like a Salvador Dali design. It looked like three fins, one upright and two curled like croissants.

That meeting with that dolphin got me wondering if anyone knew the local dolphin population well enough to recognize that one just from my description — maybe even knew something about its life. That, naturally, led me to an interview with Randy Wells, the famed dolphin research pioneer. He has been monitoring Sarasota Bay dolphins since his first days as a volunteer for the Mote Marine Laboratory in 1970.

Wells, still at it today, is the longtime coordinator of the Sarasota Dolphin Research

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Program. As I've said in the past, I think Wells is a local treasure, too.

And of course he knew the dolphin I was asking about. Wells said it was a male that had been cut by a boat propeller a decade earlier and was seen soon afterward near the Manatee River, though it was more often spotted closer to Sarasota. The dolphin had recovered amazingly well, but his damaged fin always made him easy to spot and inspired the researchers to nickname him after actor Rip Torn.

Wells said the dolphin often swam alone but was seen from time to time with other dolphins.

There's been a lot of water under the bridges since then, and Riptorn swam in lots of it. Just last month, I was surprised to learn, dolphin researchers posted news of him.

"In August 2015, we observed Riptorn with a hook and monofilament in his dorsal fin," the post said.

The entanglement seemed minor and the researchers had some concerns for Riptorn's health at age 43. And so, "the National Marine Fisheries Service decided that intervention would not be warranted. Instead we monitored him to see if he would shed the line on his own."

The Sarasota Dolphin Research program ended the posting with good news about that.

"We're pleased to tell you that on Sept. 9, 2015 SDRP staff spotted Riptorn again — this time without the line!"

But the end was near, it turned out. As you may have read, the old dolphin's body was found last Friday near the Mote Marine Laboratory site on City Island.

Riptorn had outlived most male dolphins, and I'm glad he did so well and that, despite his damaging encounter with a power boat 33 years ago, he didn't seem to hold it against us humans.

I'm also reminded how much I appreciate Wells and the other Mote researchers who know and keep track of all the 160-plus dolphins who call Sarasota Bay their home.

Those scientists keep us aware of the dolphins and keep us posted on how they are faring. And so, much like the dolphins, it is good to know the researchers are out there.

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