

Randy Wells

(Biologist, zoologist, director of the Chicago Zoological Society's Sarasota Dolphin Research Program, Sarasota; age 68)

We're at 51 years now, studying the dolphins of Sarasota Bay. When you're looking at a long-lived animal — and we've measured so far that our dolphins can live up to 67 years — having the ability to maintain continuity and consistency in how the data are collected, and getting people invested in the lives of these animals, is key.

I grew up in Peoria, Ill. My parents started vacationing in Florida when I was pretty young, and it became an annual thing. Along about when I was in the middle of high school, they decided that Florida would be a better place to live than Illinois, and they picked up stakes and moved to Sarasota. I went to Riverview High School, which offered a great set of marine biology and oceanography classes. That stimulated my interest.

Between my junior and senior years of high school, I wanted to pursue my interests and volunteer at Mote Marine Laboratories, which was then located at the south end of Siesta Key. They turned me down flat. Fortunately, a fellow named Blair Irvine, who was just coming into town to head up a project looking at the behavior interactions between sharks and dolphins, was buying a house through the real estate company that my dad worked for. My dad let him know that

I've known some of these dolphins since the 1970s. I know their histories, their dramas, what they've been through. I know their kids, their grandkids and their great-grandkids.

he had this kid who would love an opportunity to get into the field, and Blair agreed to have an interview with me, and he took me on as a volunteer.

Blair began to tag dolphins in Sarasota Bay, and I tagged along with him, and that's when we began to learn that dolphins are local, locked into their own coastal communities. Before that, we had no idea that dolphins lived in local communities.

I wish Florida was not so divided. I wish there was more of a coming together and appreciation of what truly makes Florida great. What makes Florida great is what brought us here, the natural environment, the climate. For us to lose track of those things, and the value of maintaining them, I think that's really sad.

The dolphin community here has no other place to go, so

what's going to happen as the waters get warmer? Right now, we see the highest mortality rates locally occur during summer when water temperature is highest. There are times when the water temperature approaches the body temperature of the animals, and these animals obviously can't sweat. Overheating is an issue that dolphins are going to be facing more and more, and that leads to health issues.

What we have found, unfortunately,

is that in the last couple of years, seagrasses are in decline once again. My understanding is there are more nutrients getting in the water, whether that's runoff from residential or agricultural sources. When nutrient levels go up, there's more algae, and the algae shades the waters, and the seagrasses can't thrive. The second part is the nutrients exacerbate red tides.

Once I went to work for the Chicago Zoological Society, I had the opportunity to serve either as an individual researcher and go out and watch dolphins, much like Jane Goodall watched chimpanzees and George Schaller watched gorillas, or I

could develop this program. I've been able to bring in a lot of collaborators from all over the world who could leverage my meager abilities and do a lot more to benefit dolphins here and around the world.

Dolphins and anglers are interested in many of the same fish species, so when those fish are in low abundance, such as during a red tide, everybody is vying for the same fish. In terms of the identifiable causes of death for dolphins, interaction with fishing gear is No. 1.

Sarasota's dolphins are used as a reference population for comparing against the health of dolphins in other places. For example, with the

Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the oil didn't get any closer than about 84 miles from Sarasota. When the National Marine Fisheries Service began to look at the impacts from the spill, they used techniques we use here in terms of monitoring the health of the animals, so they were able to do comparative studies of dolphins here with dolphins affected by the spill in Barataria Bay, La., and in Mississippi Sound. The thing that was most dramatic up there was lung disease, which occurred at five times the level you see in Sarasota Bay. Year-to-year survival in Sarasota Bay was on the order of 96%, which is sustainable. In Barataria Bay, it was 87%, and that's

not sustainable. Eighty-three percent of the pregnancies that we diagnose in Sarasota Bay end up with happy, healthy babies. Up there, it was 20%.

I'm concerned about how much time kids spend in front of devices, as opposed to being out in nature.

For the manatees, it's horrible. It has never been this bad. My heart goes out to the animals and to the people who are doing their very best to try to save them. What I hope is that people will take to heart how the Indian River Lagoon hit a tipping point and how quickly it went downhill and that we don't let the decline of seagrasses in other areas get to that same tipping point. 📍

