whaledreamers
A JULIAN LENNON PRODUCTION

NOW IS THE TIME OF PROPHECY
A TIME OF HOPE... A TIME FOR CHANGE

A STUDY GUIDE BY ROBERT LEWIS

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How does an ancient whale tribe come back from the edge of extinction? How will we come back from the edge of extinction ourselves?

*whaledreamers* (Kim Kindersley, 2008) is an 83-minute documentary film that addresses these two questions.

With the current concerns over global warming and the future of humanity seemingly hanging in the balance, *whaledreamers* is the story of how an ancient whale dreaming Aboriginal tribe from Southern Australia comes back from the edge of extinction. It is a story of hope, awakening and reconciliation.

Over fifteen years in the making, across five continents and oceans, the film is a personal odyssey for British filmmaker Kim Kindersley in his quest to find his spiritual roots, while experiencing and documenting the extraordinary connection, both ancient and modern, between humanity and the cetaceans.

Kindersley spoke to Amazonian Indians, Pacific Islanders, North American Indians, African people and Australian native tribes, particularly the Mirning people from South Australia.

The film is also a journey that parallels two odysseys – the journey of the Mirning people and the equally long journey of the whales, not only to survive the slaughter by man but to engage the human race into waking up in time.

With breathtaking cinematography, the documentary follows the Mirning people on a powerful journey. The Mirning people were the traditional owners of what is now called the Head of the Bight, a whale nursery area and where the Mirning had carried out whale dreaming for centuries. They lost ownership of their land in the 1950s, when the Australian government sanctioned nuclear testing at Maralinga, a rural outpost of South Australia. Incredibly in 1956, with a simple stroke of a pen, the government declared the Mirning people extinct. It gave a 99-year lease of their traditional land to the Anangu people, who were forced from the Maralinga area and relocated to the traditional lands and coastal whale sites of the Mirning – who were now transferred to an inland mission at Kooniba in South Australia. This most sacred place of the Mirning is now managed by the Anangu people.
This activity resulted in both language groups being displaced and separated from their ‘dreaming’ lands, and has become a source of conflict between the two tribes.

Assisted by eighty-five indigenous elders from around the globe, the Mirning participated in an historical gathering in 1998 called to bear witness to their reconnection with their past and their spirit animal totem – the Southern Right Whale.

Curriculum Applicability

*whaledreamers* is a resource that can be used in middle and senior secondary classrooms looking at Aboriginal Studies or Religious Studies, or the issues of whaling and/or environmentalism.

**Before Watching The Film**

**Understanding an image**

1. What is your image of whales? Brainstorm in your class to record your knowledge of and your attitudes towards them.

Include such aspects as:

- Food
- Habitat
- Location
- Migration
- Social habits
- Threats.

2. Chances are that your class has an overwhelmingly positive and even reverential attitude to whales. Discuss why that might be so – is it their size? Or their apparent gentleness? Or the way they are presented in popular imagery? Or some other reason or combination of reasons?

3. What do you know about whaling today? Summarise the arguments that are used to justify current cultural and/or commercial and/or scientific whaling that is carried out today by Japanese whalers and by some Indigenous communities.

4. Record your attitudes towards this whaling.

You should return to this information and these ideas after you have watched *whaledreamers*, and see if your knowledge and ideas are confirmed or challenged.
Now read this information about whales before watching the film.

**What are whales?**

Whales are mammals that live in the water. They are not fish. They breathe air into their lungs through one or two blowholes, they have hair, are warm-blooded, and females have mammary glands to feed their young.

The largest whale, the Blue Whale, is the largest animal that has ever existed on earth. It grows to about twenty-nine metres (the height of a nine-storey building), and a mature female might weigh up to 150 tonnes. It eats about four tonnes of tiny krill each day. The smallest whale is the Dwarf Sperm Whale which, as an adult, is about 2.6 metres long.

Whales are cetaceans – a group of animals that includes dolphins and porpoises.

Whales are either toothed whales, or baleen whales. Toothed whales feed on fish, squid and marine mammals (such as seals). They have one blowhole. There are sixty-six species of toothed whales.

Baleen whales sieve tiny crustaceans and fish through baleen – a comb-like filter. Baleen whales are larger than toothed whales, and have two blowholes. There are ten species of baleen whales.

Whales are migratory – they travel to a breeding area each year, and then back to a feeding ground.

In Australia whales move from the Southern Ocean feeding areas in summer, up the east or west coasts of Australia. On the east coast, the Humpback whales breed in the Coral Reef area; on the west coast, they breed in the north-western waters.

**Map: Distribution of Southern Right Whales in the world**
Whaling in Australia

Whaling was introduced by European colonisation after 1788. There is no record of Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people traditionally hunting whales, although it is said that aboriginal people did hunt with killer whales, in stories recounted at the Eden Killer Whale Museum. Aborigines were employed as boatcrew by some whaling masters.

Early whaling was carried out using harpoons from small boats. Once caught, the whales were towed behind the boats back to whaling stations on shore. Whale by-products were used for a number of things: whale blubber was melted down to be used as oil for lamp fuel, lubricants, candles and as a base for perfumes and soaps, baleen (whalebone) was used for items such as corsets, whips and umbrellas.

Whaling and the export of whale by-products such as whale oil became Australia’s first primary industry. One of the first commercial whaling operations in Australia was the Davidson Whaling Station located just outside of Eden on the South-East coast of New South Wales. Numerous other coastal whaling stations were established around Australia in the late 1820s to 1830s. Sealing and whaling contributed more to the colonial economy than land produce until the 1830s.

The development of harpoon guns, explosive harpoons and steam-driven whaling boats in the late 19th century made large-scale commercial whaling so efficient that many whale species were over-exploited and came very near to extinction.

In the early twentieth century, agriculture and mining suppressed a return to whaling. However, Norwegian whalers took an interest in the Australian waters and the Western Australian government encouraged whaling to develop new locations along its coast.

From 1952 until 1962 a whaling station operated at Tangalooma, Queensland, on Moreton Island, which harvested and processed 6277 Humpback Whales during that period. It was forced to close after it had drastically reduced the number of whales in the eastern Australian Humpback population.

Whaling stations in Australia and New Zealand killed over 40,000 Humpback Whales on their migrations from the Antarctic Ocean to the warm tropical waters north of Australia. Whaling ceased on Humpback Whales in 1963, and they were protected worldwide in 1965 after recognition of a dramatic global decline in numbers.

In 1978, the Federal Government appointed Sir Sydney Frost, a former chief justice of Papua New Guinea, to conduct an inquiry into whales and whaling. This followed a direct pro-whale action campaign in Albany and a national community campaign by groups including Project Jonah, Friends of the Earth and the Whale and Dolphin Coalition.
Greenpeace co-founder Canadian Bob Hunter came to Albany in August 1977 to take charge of a direct action campaign against the three whale chaser ships operating from Albany, Western Australia. Zodiacs were taken thirty miles out to sea to place people between harpoons and the whales. This was the first Greenpeace campaign in Australia. Key members of the Whale and Dolphin Coalition, including Jonny Lewis and Richard Jones, then formed Greenpeace Australia.

On 31 July 1978, the first day of the Frost inquiry public hearings, the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company announced its intention to close operations at the end of that whaling season. Cheynes Beach had operated from Frenchman Bay near Albany, Western Australia, since 1952. The last whale, a sperm whale, was harpooned on 20 November 1978.

Sir Sydney’s report, *Whales and Whaling: Report of the Independent Inquiry*, recommended banning whaling in Australia, and in April 1979 the Fraser government endorsed it, putting a permanent end to whaling in Australian waters. At the same time, Australia started to focus heavily on working towards the international protection and conservation of whales.

Since the International Whaling Commission (IWC) moratorium on commercial whaling came into effect in 1986, many whale populations have begun to recover. The Southern Right Whale, which was nearly extinct by the middle of the nineteenth century, is now showing signs of recovery. In recent years, growing numbers appear off the southern Australian coast, where breeding and socialising behaviour occurs before they head south to feed in the nutrient-rich Antarctic waters.

Whale watching is an increasingly popular activity, and is making a substantial contribution to the Australian economy. Whales are now worth far more to Australia alive than dead.

Australia is now a global anti-whaling advocate and has taken a strong stance against Japan’s whaling program in the Antarctic Ocean.

**Exploring ideas and issues in the film**

There are three main strands to the film *whaledreamers*:

- the personal journey of filmmaker Kim Kindersley to connect with whales and dolphins as part of a personal spiritual fulfilment
- the journey of Mirning man Bunna Lawrie to reconnect with his traditional land, culture and whale dreaming, and the support given to that process by a gathering of an international Indigenous group in 1998
- the pro-whale/anti-whaling message of protecting the earth in the face of environmental and climate threat.
Personal Journey

1. The film describes the personal connection of filmmaker Kim Kindersley with whales and dolphins. What do you think this adds to the film?

2. Such personal journeys often require great qualities in the person making the journey. List the qualities you think Kindersley shows in this film.

Journey of Mirning man Bunna Lawrie

whaledreamers focuses on the journey of Bunna Lawrie to reconnect with and restore aspects of his traditional culture.

3. Why are spiritual and cultural traditions significant to many people's sense of identity?

4. Many people today are rationalists, and do not accept that there is any connection between spiritual beliefs and the way the world works. They would not accept, for example, that the ceremonies that are carried out to 'call' the whales really work. Are rationalist and spiritualist attitudes in conflict, or can both be held in a society?

5. Another message of the film is the tragedy of the disintegration of Australian Indigenous cultures. The elements that are mentioned as part of this process are:
   - seizure of land
   - the disruption of family and culture through the Stolen Generations
   - the disruption of family and culture through the mission experience
   - genocide
   - poisoning
   - spread of introduced diseases
   - re-allocation of traditional lands of one group to another.

Some of these elements are undoubtedly true, some of them – especially the claims briefly made in the film of genocide and poisoning – are more contentious. Research these claims.

A good starting point is the documentary series First Australians. For information on using this series, download the ATOM study guides for each of the seven episodes.

6. Research the history of the traditional group of the area where you live and create a narrative that explains the impacts and consequences of the invasion of the original owners’ territory by the new colonists and settlers. How does the local experience in your area compare with the image created in whaledreamers? Are all the disruptive features there? Are there other aspects of contact experience, such as accommodation and co-operation? You could allocate
different areas or regions among your class to research so that you cover a variety of experiences in place and time of contact/conflict.

7 In some areas of Australia, such as the area of the Yolngu people who feature in the film, traditional culture is largely intact. Research and explain why this is so.

8 The gathering in 1998 brought together Indigenous people from a variety of places. What was their common story?

9 What do you think is the outcome of Bunna Lawrie’s journey to reconnect with his culture – for himself, and for the Mirning people?

10 The film talks about the need for reconciliation between the original Indigenous people and those who took their land and disrupted their culture. How might reconciliation be achieved with the Mirning people?

Pro-whale/anti-whaling message of protecting the earth

A key message of the film is the need to protect whales, as a symbol of protecting the earth.

11 Many Indigenous people have traditionally hunted whales as part of their culture. One of the international guests at the gathering opposes her tribe’s traditional killing of whales. How does the film respond to this apparent clash between the need to protect whales, and the cultural rights of Indigenous people?

12 Which view do you think should prevail? Why?

The issue of modern whaling is also raised through vision of the Japanese hunting of whales in the Antarctic. Look at the information below on the arguments and justification of both the Japanese whalers and the anti-whalers.

A) In Japan

The Japanese have been eating whale meat and utilising whalebones, blubber and oil for more than two thousand years.

Active hunting for large cetaceans has a history of more than 400 years. Off-shore coastal whaling activities began after the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

Following the devastation of World War Two, food was scarce in Japan and whale meat, a cheap source of protein, became a major part of the Japanese diet. With increasing affluence, the Japanese turned to other fish and meat. The consumption of whale meat peaked in 1962 at 226,000 tons, and then declined to 15,000 tons by 1985, before the present commercial whaling ban took force.

In the few areas where whaling has been conducted traditionally, whale meat has become an integral part of the community such that all local ceremonies or festivities include the serving of some whale meat dishes.

In modern urban areas, the Japanese whaling industry is encouraging the consumption of whale meat, for example by supplying it free of charge to schools for children’s lunches.

13 Describe the main changes in whaling over time.

14 What has the impact of developing technology been on whale populations?

15 The Japanese argue that customs are important and must be maintained. Do you agree, or do you think that we can expect that any group’s customs must change to suit modern times? Explain your view.
B) Hypocrisy on the high seas

Thirty years ago as a concerned Australian and a philosophy professor working on the ethics of our treatment of animals, Peter Singer made a submission to an inquiry on whaling:

I did not argue that whaling should stop because whales are endangered. I knew that many expert ecologists and marine biologists would make that claim. Instead, I argued that whales were social mammals with big brains, capable of enjoying life and of feeling pain, and not only physical pain but also very likely distress at the loss of one of their group.

Whales cannot be humanely killed: they are too large, and even with an explosive harpoon it is difficult to hit a whale in the right spot. Moreover, whalers do not want to use a large amount of explosive because that would blow the whale to pieces, while the whole point is to recover valuable oil or flesh. So, harpooned whales typically die slowly and painfully.

Causing suffering to innocent beings without an extremely weighty reason for doing so is wrong. If there were some life-or-death need that humans could meet only by killing whales, perhaps the ethical case against it could be countered. But there is no essential human need that requires us to kill whales. Everything we get from whales can be obtained without cruelty elsewhere. Thus, whaling is unethical …

Japan justifies its whaling as research, because the International Whaling Commission’s rules allow member nations to kill whales for such purposes. But the research seems to be aimed at building a scientific case for a resumption of commercial whaling; so, if whaling is unethical, then the research is unnecessary as well as unethical.

Japan says it wants the discussion of whaling to be carried out calmly, on the basis of scientific evidence, without emotion. The Japanese think that Humpback whale numbers have increased sufficiently for the killing of fifty to pose no danger to the species. On this narrow point, they might be right. But no amount of science can tell us whether or not to kill whales.

Indeed, Japan’s desire to continue to kill whales is no less motivated by emotion than environmentalists’ opposition to it. Eating whales is not necessary for the health or better nutrition of the Japanese. It is a tradition that they wish to continue, presumably because some Japanese are emotionally attached to it.

The Japanese do have one argument that is not so easily dismissed. They claim that Western countries object to whaling because, for them, whales are a special kind of animal, as cows are for Hindus. Western nations, the Japanese say, should not try to impose their cultural beliefs on them.

The best response to this argument is that the wrongness of causing needless suffering to sentient beings is not culturally specific. It is, for example, one of the first precepts of one of Japan’s main ethical traditions, Buddhism. But Western nations are in a weak position to make this response, because they inflict so much unnecessary suffering on animals.

The Australian Government strongly opposes whaling, yet it permits the killing of millions of kangaroos each year: a slaughter that involves a great deal of animal suffering. The same can be said of various forms of hunting in other countries, not to mention the extensive animal suffering caused by factory farms.

Whaling should stop because it brings needless suffering to social, intelligent animals capable of enjoying their lives. But against the Japanese charge of cultural bias, Western countries will have little defence until they address the needless animal suffering in their own back yards.

– Peter Singer, 22 January 2008. Peter Singer, a professor of bioethics at Princeton University, is the author of Animal Liberation and The Ethics of What We Eat (with Jim Mason).
16 Discuss the different arguments raised here.

17 What other arguments might a supporter of whaling put – for example, regarding feeding people with a sustainable source of protein?

18 Do you accept that killing whales is humane and justified?

19 Do you support or oppose Japanese whaling in Antarctic waters?

The Japanese claim that their whaling has scientific justification. Look at the following information to make your own decision about this claim.

Is the Japanese whaling program scientific?

The International Whaling Commission has a ban on the killing of whales. There are two exceptions: where the killing is by indigenous people in pursuit of traditional custom, and where the killing is for scientific study. Japanese whaling in the Antarctic is for scientific study.

Japan sends out three whale hunting vessels, which are supplied from – and take their catch back to – a large mother ship.

The mother ship freezes the whale meat and returns it to Japan for sale to restaurateurs.

In recent years, Japanese have killed the following number of whales:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEASON</th>
<th>MINKE</th>
<th>FIN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000/2001</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001/2002</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>2002/2003</td>
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<td>2004/2005</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/2006</td>
<td>853</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006/2007</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Japan’s 2007/2008 whaling program was originally:

- 935 Minke whales
- 50 Fin whales
- 50 Humpback whales.

The Japanese later announced that they would not take the Humpback whales until after the report of the 2008 IWC meeting.

However, some critics have argued that the science is not acceptable, but is merely a cover for commercial whaling.

The following table provides more detailed information from both sides on the scientific argument – one that is often not dealt with in any detail in media reports.
Read the following information and decide for yourself whether the science is the primary reason for whaling, and whether it is justified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JAPANESE VIEW</th>
<th>CRITICS' VIEW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research is carried out by the Institute of Cetacean Research, a privately-owned and non-profit organisation employing reputable scientists.</td>
<td>The research centre is funded by the Japanese whaling industry and is not independent in attitude.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The IWC explicitly says that where whales are killed for study the meat must not be wasted.</td>
<td>The meat is sold and the proceeds go towards funding the institute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable whale management policies must come from accurate and detailed research: This requires research over a long period.</td>
<td>The research is often unnecessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lethal research is necessary as non-lethal research is inaccurate. For example, the analysis of whale skin flakes does not specify the exact age of a whale.</td>
<td>Non-lethal research through skin flakes that are shed when whales leap out of and slam back into the water provides an age range that is sufficiently accurate to draw conclusions about whale populations. It is better to have an approximate age of a living whale than the exact age of a dead one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Scientific Committee of the IWC has found many aspects of Japanese research to be useful. There is division among scientists.</td>
<td>In 2005, the IWC voted thirty to twenty-seven urging the Japanese Government to stop its lethal research, or to substitute non-lethal methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As head counts are not acceptable to the IWC as a measure of populations, the Japanese argue that accurate age and sex counts are necessary to establish population status.</td>
<td>It is not necessary to know the exact age of whales.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stomach analysis of dead whales reveals their feeding patterns.</td>
<td>It only shows their last meals, not their overall diet. Analysis of skin samples taken in a non-lethal way can in fact provide a long-term view of a whale’s diet over a longer time period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killing whales provides information on their sex and reproductive condition.</td>
<td>Non-lethal biopsies also reveal sex and reproductive information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 1987 to 2006 Japanese scientists have presented 182 scientific documents to the Scientific Committee of the IWC and have had 91 papers published in peer-reviewed journals.</td>
<td>Results of Japanese scientists of whale diet are poor science and would not be accepted in any peer-reviewed journal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
20 Why might scientists disagree on scientific issues?

21 If scientists disagree, how can ordinary people make a decision based on knowledge and understanding of a situation?

22 How might this problem be resolved?

Is the Japanese whaling program legal?

The Australian Government is opposed to whaling. It believes that it is unnecessary, and threatens the ecological balance of the Southern Ocean environment. It also threatens Australia’s developing east coast whale tourism. Whale and dolphin watching is a growing industry in Australia and, as of 2003, was estimated to be worth close to $300 million a year to the Australian economy. During the past five years, the industry has grown by fifteen per cent per year. In the Pacific region, whale watching tourism is now in fourteen countries, and generates more than $US21 million.

On 15 January 2008, the Federal Court found that the Japanese whalers ‘had killed, injured, taken and interfered with Antarctic Minke whales and Fin whales, and had injured, taken and interfered with Humpback whales’ within the Australian Whale Sanctuary area off Antarctica, contrary to the law set out in the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999. This prohibits the hunting of whales in this Sanctuary.

Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, nations can claim control of the sea up to 200 nautical miles (370.4 kilometres) adjacent to their mainland and island coasts. Australia claims a large area of Antarctica as its own, so the Whale Sanctuary includes much of the Southern Ocean.

However, only four nations accept Australia’s claim to the Antarctic Territory, and Japan is not one of these. According to the Japanese Government, therefore, the Japanese whalers were not breaking any valid Australian law.

It is also possible, however, that a legal challenge could be brought against Japanese whalers for possible breaches of CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), an international agreement between governments. Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

23 List the three different legal jurisdictions under which it is possible that Japanese whaling could be challenged.

24 Do you believe the Japanese are acting legally or illegally? Explain your view.

25 How could this legal situation be resolved? Explain your possible solutions.

26 What do you think should be the outcome:
- No hunting of whales at all
- Limited hunting for scientific purposes only
- Limited hunting for scientific and cultural purposes
- Limited hunting in a way that protects the sustainability of the whale stocks

Be prepared to provide an informed argument to support your view.
Making and evaluating the film

_Whaledreamers_ stresses the involvement of several ‘names’ – the main credits say:

**Narrated by JACK THOMPSON**

With special guest appearances by JACK THOMPSON, JULIAN LENNON, JOHN HURT, PIERCE BROSNAN and GEOFFREY RUSH

27 Identify their roles in the film.

28 Why would a filmmaker stress these names even when some of them have such a small role in the film?

29 The film is dominated by two quite limited elements: whales swimming in the ocean, and a meeting of international Indigenous representatives near the Head of the Bight on the Nullarbor Plain. How does the filmmaker maintain visual and narrative interest and involvement in the film? Look especially at the way film is used, and the soundtrack.

The makers of the film say:

_The film also brings into focus how the events of September 11, global warming, the increased natural resource depletion, deforestation and the ensuing war on terror are destroying the planet. The message Kindersley and Lennon hope to bring across is that people of the world coming together in peace can make a difference._

And:

_The Whales are the obvious icon of the environment. If we can’t save them, and respect them, what hope is there for the rest? Whaledreamers touches people. The indigenous people of the planet have been dreaming with these magnificent creatures for thousands of years and have something important to impart to us._ While whaledreamers is a story of decimated indigenous tribes struggling against extinction and of a world in peril, the film also carries a story of great hope – of the return of a tribe of Aboriginal Whaledreamers, the re-awakening of our collective connection with the natural world and a deep message of peace and transformation.

30 Do you think they have succeeded in this film? Explain your reasons.
Southern Right Whale Facts

**Scientific name**  
*Eubalaena Australis*

**Status**  
Listed as Endangered under the *Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.*

**Description**  
Large baleen whales reaching a maximum length of 17.5 metres and weight of 80 tonnes. ‘Baleen’ means having 225-250 fringed overlapping plates hanging from each side of the upper jaw. These plates are made of fingernail-type material called keratin through which whales sift or filter their food, tiny marine creatures.

**Colour**  
Black, often with a white blaze on the underside, with whitish or yellowish callosities on the rostrum, chin and lower jaw. These are formed as roughened patches of keratinised skin and colonised by cyamids (small crustaceans known as ‘whale lice’).

**Life expectancy**  
Believed to be fifty+ under normal conditions.

**Breeding**  
Calving is about every three years, with a one-year gestation period for calves.

**Nursery**  
Whales congregate in seasonal nursery areas off the south coast of Australia between May and November.

**Population**  
The estimated population was about 7000 in 2001, with about 1200 of these in waters off Australia.

**Protection**  
Within Australian jurisdiction the Great Australian Bight Marine Park is a protected area.

**Threats**  
- Killer Whales
- Acoustic interference (from vessel noise and seismic surveys)
- Entanglement in fishing lines
- Ship strike
- Marine drilling infrastructure
- Changing water quality and pollution
- Changes to water flow regimes

**Movement**  
Migration movement is about four kilometres per hour.

For more information on *whaledreamers*, visit the film’s website <http://www.whaledreamers.com>.