

## **The Flipper Debate: Filmmaker Handout**

### **General Introduction**

During the next class session we will watch clips from a film that focuses on the killing of dolphins in Japan. After watching the clip, we will all be participating in a preliminary governmental hearing about a dispute depicted in the film. There are two sides in the dispute and you will be playing the role of someone on one of the sides: either Japanese fishermen and women or Western filmmakers and animal activists. The purpose of the hearing is to help the judge (role played by your teacher) determine whether or not “the powers that be” should take future action against the killing of dolphins in Japan. The main issue you should focus on in this hearing is whether or not the parties involved in the dispute have been unfair and unethical in how they have treated dolphins or each other during the dispute. In other words, your role is to convince the judge that the people on the other side of the dispute are somehow wrong, unfair, unethical, and/or misguided in their behaviors and beliefs. After watching the film, you will have some time to prepare your case and to select a spokesperson or spokespeople to cross examine the other side and to present your arguments to the judge. Before class, however, to help you get ready for the hearing, you should read and get familiar with the following material.

### **Filmmaker Role**

You are being asked to play the role of a Western filmmaker or animal activist from the award winning movie, *The Cove*. This documentary style movie takes a strong stand against the Japanese practice of killing dolphins for any reason and records a covert effort to stop the slaughter of dolphins in the Japanese town of Taiji. The conflict between the Western filmmakers and the Japanese fishing community centers on different perspectives and attitudes toward dolphins. As many of you have most likely been raised with Western cultural ideas, beliefs and values, the perspective of *The Cove* filmmakers may be one that you share. To add to your own experiences and information provided by the film, this handout is intended to supply you with some further background on the long, close and complicated relationship Westerners have with dolphins.

### **Dolphin behavior**

Dolphins are widely regarded as one of the most intelligent animals on earth. Their friendliness toward humans and playful antics make them popular animals with Western cultures. They surf coastal swells and thrill boaters by jumping their bow waves. They have been known to play games with seaweed, bubble rings, as well as with an occasional seagull, turtle or fortunate swimmer.

Dolphins form into groups called pods that communicate with each other using clicks and whistles. They communicate in order to be able to work as a team to catch food and protect the group. Dolphins care for other members of their pod, staying with them if they are sick or injured. They have even been known to protect humans from shark attacks by circling around the swimmer or chasing off the menacing shark.

### **Threats to dolphins**

While a species of dolphin occupies every ocean, sea or large river system, some dolphins, especially river dolphins, are threatened by human activity. A 2006 study found no Yangtze River Dolphins, leading to the conclusion that they are now extinct. Pesticides, heavy metals, industrial waste and other pollutants found in the oceans are also found in high concentrations in dolphins, endangering their health and the health of those who eat them. The toxins lower the animals' chance for reproduction and weaken their immune systems, making them more susceptible to disease. The use of military sonar and off-shore construction projects have also been shown to be safety threats to dolphins.

Because dolphins are often found near the same schools of yellowfin tuna that are prized by fishing fleets, the nets used for tuna fishing have caused countless dolphins to drown. In 1990, the United States Department of Commerce developed a "dolphin safe" label for tuna which has allowed consumers to choose tuna from producers who have taken action to avoid catching dolphins. Numerous other non-profit organizations, as well as Australia, New Zealand and countries of the European Union have followed with their own "dolphin safe" labels. Dolphins continue to be hunted for food, oil, fertilizer and other products, but only by a very small number of nations and subsistence fishing communities.

### **Dolphin popularity**

In an early Roman myth, a dolphin riding boy named Palaimon, along with his mother, came to the aid of sailors in danger. This view of dolphins as compassionate animals has fueled the strong desire to see and interact with dolphins in Western cultures. The Flipper movie (1963) and television shows (1964, 1996) in which the Flipper was able to communicate with humans and help them solve their problems, further popularized dolphins in contemporary U.S. society. Dolphins' ability to learn and their playful nature have made them some of the most popular attractions in aquariums and ocean theme parks around the world.

As interest in dolphin conservation has risen, people have begun to question the captivity of dolphins and have called for further information about the activities of dolphins in their natural habitat. In response to public requests, the popular IMAX film Dolphins (2000) followed marine biologist as they studied the animals in the wild. The long cultural connection to dolphins, the many Western tales that include them and the beautiful images of the animals seen in movies and films has solidified Westerners view of dolphins as extraordinary creatures. When asked, many state that their life long dream is to swim with the dolphins.

Hopefully, this handout has given you a greater sense of the place dolphins have in Western society. Best wishes on the role play next class.