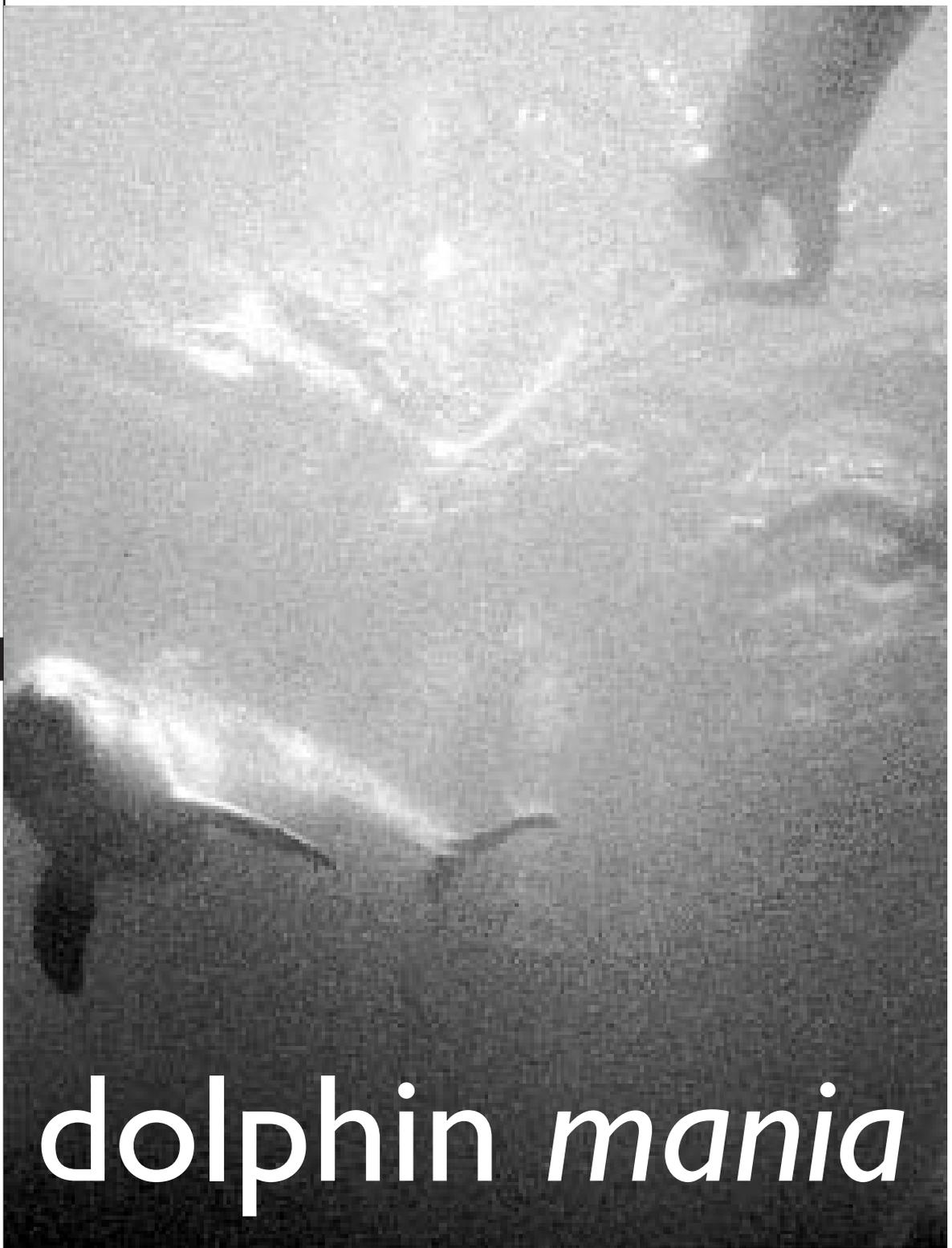


CHRISTINA JARVIS AND SALLY INGLETON



# dolphin *mania*



ISSUE 28 AUSTRALIAN SCREEN EDUCATION

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A STUDY GUIDE

*Dolphin Mania* tells the story of a coastal community outside of Melbourne where a small number of operators—with differing philosophies—are licensed to run dolphin swim tours. A code of practice has been established to protect the dolphins, but these regulations are rarely policed, leaving the operators to enforce the law amongst themselves.

Judy Muir and her family run the boat Polperro and set off twice a day from Sorrento pier. When the dolphins appear the passengers hang onto buoy lines and squeal with delight as the mammals leap and cavort nearby. Such encounters are euphoric and research has shown that the result can be therapeutic, particularly for those suffering from illnesses or emotional disorders.

But Judy worries about what impact the tours may be having on the animals. Researchers have found that when the tour boats approach the dolphins, their behaviour changes markedly. They may alter direction, call out more frequently to each other or even send out a decoy dolphin to interact with the boats while the rest swim away. On a busy day, tour boats are interacting with the dolphins every ninety seconds. No one knows what long-term implications may result from this constant disturbance. Judy and her son Troy now face a daily dilemma: how can they introduce people to the marine environment without turning it into a theme park? *Dolphin Mania* explores the viability of nature based tourism through the experience of a small community of tour boat operators.

#### Curriculum Links

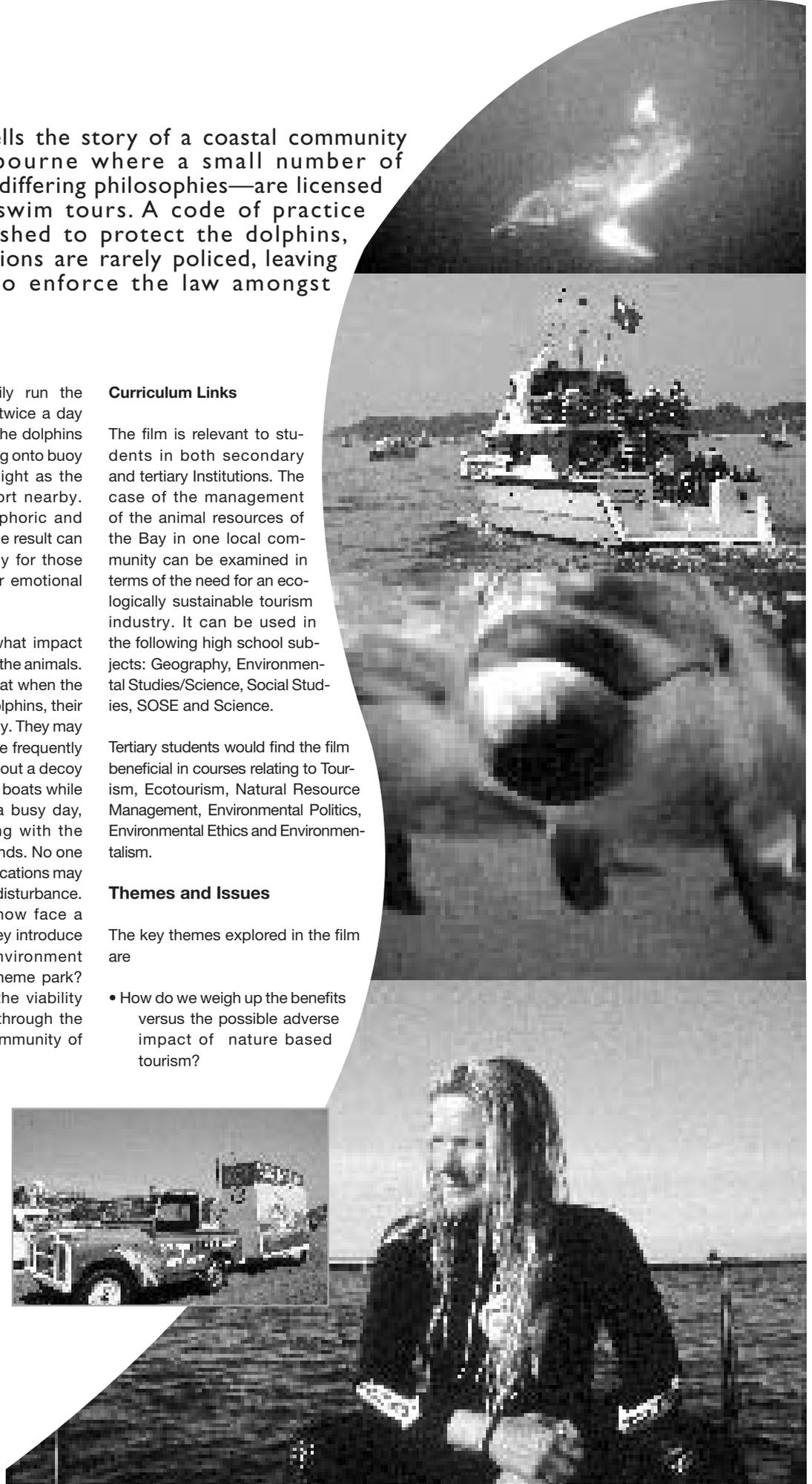
The film is relevant to students in both secondary and tertiary institutions. The case of the management of the animal resources of the Bay in one local community can be examined in terms of the need for an ecologically sustainable tourism industry. It can be used in the following high school subjects: Geography, Environmental Studies/Science, Social Studies, SOSE and Science.

Tertiary students would find the film beneficial in courses relating to Tourism, Ecotourism, Natural Resource Management, Environmental Politics, Environmental Ethics and Environmentalism.

#### Themes and Issues

The key themes explored in the film are

- How do we weigh up the benefits versus the possible adverse impact of nature based tourism?



- How can we best manage nature based tourism?
- Is it ethical to use animals for commercial gain?
- Should humans be allowed to interact with wild animals? What are the implications of habituating wild animals?
- Do animals have the ability to promote wellbeing and healing?

### Background

#### Value of Cetacean Based Tourism

In Australia, income derived from dolphin and whale-based tourism has risen substantially in recent years, from A\$2.3 million in 1991, to A\$5.17 million in 1993 and A\$8.9 million in 1994.<sup>1</sup> In 1998 in the USA, more than 4.8 million people went whale and dolphin watching, spending over \$US1 billion annually on the industry. Since 1994 the number of people who take part internationally in whale watching trips has grown by 40%. At least 492 communities in 87 countries now have whale watching businesses.<sup>2</sup>

#### Nature Based Tourism

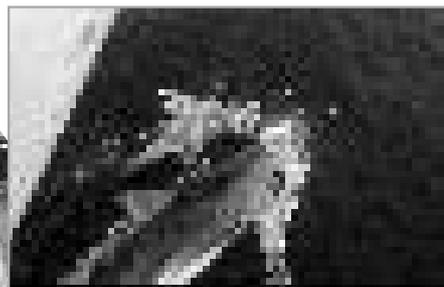
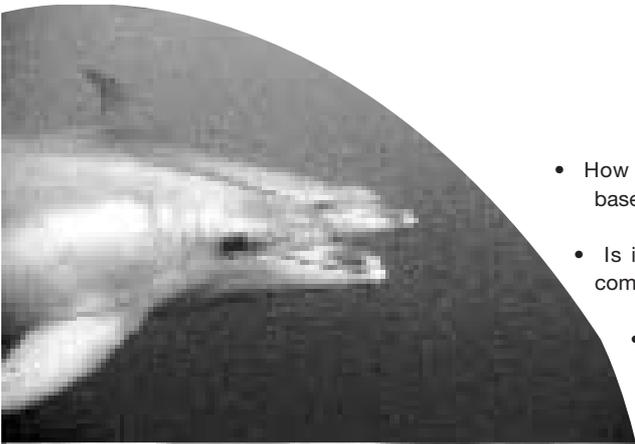
Once it was only possible to see animals in zoos or in marine parks but in recent years there has been a huge growth in wildlife tourism around the world. People now want to

see animals in their natural habitat—but often under zoo like conditions, at close range and on demand. They want to interact—to touch, pat and feed these wild animals almost as if they were pets.

To ensure that the tourist is satisfied, the tour operator often has to lure the animals to come in close. Sometimes this is done by feeding the animals. Unfortunately this can lead to dangerous interactions for both animals and tourists. There are many cases of attacks from monkeys, bears, lions, gorillas, dingoes and even dolphins.<sup>3</sup>

In Australia it is illegal to feed wild dolphins or for a swimmer to approach within thirty metres of them.<sup>4</sup> These encounters are generally managed by tour operators and are legislated for under the Wildlife (Whale Watching) Guidelines 1990, part of the Wildlife Act 1975. The Act is enforceable by government officials.

In Australia there are three places where people can 'officially' hand feed dolphins: Tangalooma, on the west coast of Moreton Island, Queensland; the Dolphin Discovery Centre, Bunbury; and Monkey Mia, in Western Australia.<sup>5</sup> At Monkey Mia, a small number of dolphins have been coming into the shallow waters of Shark Bay for nearly forty years to accept fish from eager tourists. Now more than three hundred people per day travel to this isolated place to witness the apparent friendliness of these wild animals. Each Monkey Mia 'beach' dolphin is said to be worth seven million 'tourist' dollars.



## Port Phillip Bay

### History of the Dolphin Swim Industry

In the State of Victoria it is illegal to feed wild dolphins. Instead, tourism has centred on swimming with the population of over one hundred bottlenose dolphins which reside in Port Phillip Bay. These swim-with-dolphin programmes began in 1986 as fundraisers for the local Dolphin Research Institute.

The Polperro, owned by the Muir family, was originally chartered to run the tours. The popularity of the swims soared and soon the Institute dropped out and left the tour management to commercial operators, including the Muirs. Before long problems emerged. Boats would cut across each other to herd the animals close to the shore. People would grab the dolphins and try to ride on their backs. Without ropes to hang onto or a limit on the number of swimmers, it was unsafe for people and dolphins.

### Regulations

In 1995 Judy Muir and the other tour operators got together and wrote up a voluntary Code of Practice<sup>6</sup> with the then Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the then Dolphin Research Project as a means to provide guidelines for managing human-dolphin interactions in the bay. The Code was based on the Wildlife (Whale Watching) Guidelines 1990. Under the Federal Whale Watching Guidelines, any motor powered vessel cannot: approach cetacea within 100 metres; approach

the animals head-on; or drop anchor within 300 metres of the animals. In addition, within 300 metres of a whale or dolphin, boats should slow down, not make any sudden shifts in position, move away if the animal appears disturbed, not make any attempt to feed the animals and not make noises that could disturb them.

The Code of Practice formed the basis for the Wildlife (Whales) Regulations 1998 which stipulate a number of regulations that permit holders must abide by in order to conduct swim tours with the dolphins in Port Phillip Bay including:

- tour boats must not approach the dolphins closer than 50 metres;
- tour boats must not be in the path of the dolphins;
- tour boats must ensure that swimmers hang onto mermaid lines at all times whilst in the water;
- swims must not be undertaken when young calves are present; and
- tour boats must not conduct swims within 200 metres of shore.

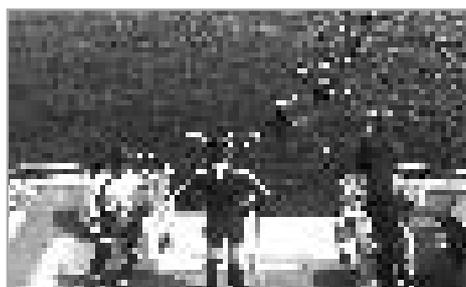
The regulations are designed to allow dolphins the choice to interact or not with humans rather than having to possibly avoid boats disturbing them. Members of the public in boats must not approach closer than 100 metres to whales and dolphins in Victoria.

Sadly, these regulations are inadequately policed due to a shortage of Fisheries Officers so the tour operators are often left to enforce the law amongst themselves.

### Tour Operators

In Port Phillip Bay, a small group of boat operators have obtained licences to run tours to swim with the bottlenose dolphins. However, as is clear in the film, the management of these activities is fraught with problems. Judy Muir of Polperro Dolphin Swims first swam with dolphins in 1986. Her passion for the animals is the basis of her successful family run ecotourism business. The film documents her desire to show the dolphins to tourists in order to educate them about the animals and the marine environment of Port Phillip Bay. At the same time, she is faced with the dilemma of the impact that swimming tours might be having on the animals she loves.

Judy runs the business with her husband, Tony and her sons, Troy and Ben. Troy has amassed an immense collection of photographs of the dolphins and can identify many of them on sight. In relation to the dolphin swims, Troy says, 'It seems more a case of everyone wanting to make a buck and access is far more important than protection'. His disenchantment comes from years of working to protect the dolphins, while at the same time being a witness to acts by the unlicensed boating public which harm the animals, such as chasing them in powerboats and jet skis and attempting to climb on their backs.





Martin Mackinnon from Moonraker Charters has lived in Sorrento all his life and comes from a family of professional fishermen. For as long as he can remember there have been dolphins in the Bay; it's only in the last two decades that people have taken notice of them. Martin believes that if the dolphins don't like tourists or the boats they are free to swim away. The Moonraker is a purpose built luxury tour vessel which operates up to three trips a day and is licensed to carry eighty passengers. Its 1100 horsepower engine can travel at 25 knots, compared to Polperro's 80 horsepower engine, which travels up to 8 knots. Martin is critical of many of the regulations and feels that greater contact between tourists and dolphins would not harm the animals.

In Port Phillip Bay the dolphins cannot always be found. Fortunately for the tourists there is a colony of Australian fur seals that live on a channel marker just out from Sorrento. Tour boats visit these animals on a regular basis, yet there are no guidelines in place to protect the animals from people nor indeed to safeguard people from possible attack by the animals. Placed under continual pressure from tour boats, the seals have been known to exhibit aggressive behaviour towards swimmers. Clearly there is a need for scientific research to be carried out before such interactions take place to ensure adequate management measures are put in place to protect both the tourists and the animals.

### **Are the Dolphins At Risk?**

The Dolphin Research Institute have found that at least six of the one hundred estimated dolphins in the Bay regularly choose to interact with the tour boats. They often come in and ride on the bow wave at the front of the boat, or swim around the mermaid lines at the back of the boat seeking contact

with the swimmers. Some dolphins appear to act as decoys, swimming over to the tour boats while the rest of the pod escape. It has even been argued that the dolphins may whistle more frequently to each other when the tour boats approach.<sup>7</sup> The risk is that by spending a lot of time with the tour boats the dolphins may become distracted from normal behaviour like feeding, mating and resting. They may also become habituated to people to the extent where they lose their 'wildness'.<sup>8</sup>

Martin Mackinnon from Moonraker Charters feels the dolphins are free to come and go from his vessel, whereas researchers from the Dolphin Research Institute argue that the animals are relentlessly pursued by tour boats, plus other recreational craft, including jet skis. This harassment and careless boathandling has even led to the recent death of a dolphin calf that had to be shot by wildlife officers because its dorsal fin had been cut in half by a boat propeller. The Dolphin Research Institute estimates that on a busy day, tour boats are interacting with the dolphins every ninety seconds. No one knows what long-term implications may result from this constant disturbance. The challenge facing all tour operators is to ensure that adequate management is in place and that it is adhered to.

### **Why Do People Want to Swim With the Dolphins?**

In the past, dolphins have played a starring role in the mythology of the ancient Greeks and other great civilizations. There are also many contemporary stories of individual dolphins who have sought the company of humans, such as 'Opo', the New Zealand dolphin, 'Fungi' from Ireland and 'Bubbles' in Wales.<sup>9</sup>

Today dolphins are widely used by New Age devotees and environmental groups as symbols of a pure and peaceful way of life. They are regularly given an anthropomorphic image, as can be seen in films such as *Flipper* and *Free Willy*. Internet searches relating to New Ageism, dolphins and dolphin assisted therapy reveal a large community of people around the world interested in the supposed spiritual connection between humans and dolphins. In Australia, the Dolphin Society run Dolphin Within encounters with the animals in Sydney Harbour and Port Stephens (see [www.dolphinsoc.org](http://www.dolphinsoc.org)). This New Age organization uses an electroencephalogram machine to monitor changes in peoples' brainwave patterns following dolphin encounters. They have shown that a swim with these charismatic animals can provide health benefits. This has been particularly the case for people with depression, mental illness or cancer.

*Dolphin Mania* follows the experience of a young woman, Melissa Holland, recovering from brain injuries. She is visibly moved when the dolphins play around the bow of the Polperro and we feel her sense of joy at having survived her accident.

Tourists' expectations of seeing the dolphins are very high. Over the 1997-'98 summer a survey of tourists on the dolphin boats found that 45% wanted to see dolphins unconfined, in close proximity, and they wanted the opportunity to learn more about the animals.<sup>10</sup> One woman stated that she wanted to see dolphins 'in nature and not as a toy for humans in a park'. Another person stated that 'actually seeing them, going out and watching them is what changes you'. The film follows the experience of a group of New Age spiritualists and their belief that dolphins are here to heal humankind. They believe that by being in the water with the animals and feeling their sonar they too are receiving a 'healing'.

People are very disappointed when the dolphins do not appear. Sometimes no other creature—be it a seal or an octopus—can replace the dream of swimming with a dolphin. This can place pressure on the tour operators, who do their best to ensure people receive the experience they have paid for. In the film we see a group of English travellers complaining to Judy Muir that they have missed out on dolphins. Judy explains that they are wild creatures and if they were always around, there would be 'sixty boats out here hammering them'.

Researchers in New Zealand have found that increasingly the dolphins are not around on busy days and have begun to avoid the tour boats.<sup>11</sup> The Dolphin Research Institute, as well as the tour operators, report anecdotal evidence of this happening in Port Phillip Bay. Dive masters from both the Polperro and Moonraker boats have said that there are fewer dolphins around now than before, and that it is much harder to get a 'good swim'. They can foresee the day when swim-with-dolphin tours are stopped and only sightseeing is allowed.

The question remains as to whether or not such wildlife interaction experiences work to educate the public or exploit the animals. In some cases, such as the wild dingoes of Fraser Island, over familiarity with wild animals has left tourists injured and, in extreme instances, dead.

### Response Sheet

Below are a list of questions aimed to test the student's concentration and comprehension of basic information in the film.

1. What government body is responsible for issuing licences for the dolphin tour boats?
2. What does Judy Muir tell her customers to help the dolphins

- remain wild?
3. What are the supposed therapeutic qualities of dolphins?
  4. What is the dilemma faced by Judy Muir?
  5. What other animals do the tour boats visit?
  6. How do Judy Muir and Martin Mackinnon's attitudes to interacting with wild animals differ?
  7. What impact does rubbish from the city have on the seals of Port Phillip Bay?
  8. Why do you think that interactions with dolphins are regulated, whereas interactions with seals are not?
  9. When and why did dolphin swims begin?
  10. A Code of Practice has been introduced to regulate the dolphin boats. Name some of the regulations that aim to protect the dolphins.
  11. Why does Troy Muir say people can't swim with dolphin calves?
  12. Why does Troy Muir think it would be bad if people were allowed to feed the dolphins?
  13. What connection do the New Age spiritualists feel with the dolphins?
  14. What are the scientific studies saying about the impact of tourists on dolphins?
  15. How many people visit Sorrento each year to see the dolphins?
  16. What fraction of swimmers see the dolphins underwater?
  17. In what ways may the dolphin tour boats affect the behaviour of the dolphins?
  18. How often do tour boats interact with the dolphins in peak summer?
  19. How does Judy Muir use the dolphins to teach people about the marine environment?
  20. How many and what species of dolphin reside in Port Phillip Bay?

### Answers

1. Department of Natural Resources and Environment Victoria
2. Judy tells people not to touch the dolphins.
3. Dolphins can cause a change in people's brain wave patterns; they boost our immune system; their sonar can heal human tissue.
4. Judy wants the dolphins and the marine environment to be left in a pristine condition. But if we leave them alone, then no one knows about their existence or how important it is to protect them, so they may become diminished like many other species.
5. Australian fur seals.
6. Judy Muir wants to keep the dolphins wild. Martin Mackinnon believes it is exciting when the animals come in close and gives the example of one seal who is almost ready to climb on the back of his boat, Moonraker.
7. Rubbish can get caught around their necks and cut into their flesh, causing strangulation.
8. Dolphins are considered to be more special and worthy of protection than seals.
9. Dolphin swims began in 1986 to raise funds for dolphin research.
10. Some regulations include:
  - tour boats cannot approach dolphins within fifty metres;
  - rope lines must be used for the safety of swimmers and dolphins, and people must not leave the lines; and
  - no swims can be conducted when dolphin calves are in the water.
11. Troy says:
  - the calves move more slowly than adults and can't get away from boats or swimmers;
  - the adults stay with the



calves and therefore may endanger themselves trying to protect the calves;

- the adults are not able to dive quickly when they have calves, as calves cannot dive; and
  - dolphins become easy targets when calves are present.
12. Feeding dolphins means that they will become used to people, which can endanger them and reduce their ability to fend for themselves. Feeding dolphins means that people will exploit them.
  13. The spiritualists believe the dolphins are our spiritual guardians, that dolphins want to connect with us, and they ask the dolphins to assist them in healing themselves.
  14. The scientific studies say that if dolphins are spending so much time with the tour boats then they might be neglecting their feeding, mating or sleeping behaviours. They might also get sick from contaminants in the water such as sunscreen.
  15. Fifteen thousand people
  16. One third of swimmers are likely to see dolphins underwater.
  17. When the tour boats are near the dolphins they can alter their behaviour by changing their swimming direction, calling out more frequently to each other, and sending out decoy dolphins to swim with the boats while the rest swim away.
  18. Every ninety seconds.
  19. Judy Muir uses the dolphins to attract people to the experience of Port Phillip Bay; she can show them other marine life and teach them about the importance of looking after our marine environment and how we impact upon it.
  20. There are approximately one hundred bottlenose dolphins living in Port Phillip Bay.

### Questions For Further Discussion and Class Debate

1. Locate Port Phillip Bay and Sorrento on a map of Victoria.
2. Using *Dolphin Mania* and with additional Internet research, what can you find out about the population of wild dolphins in Port Phillip Bay?
3. Discuss the reasons why you think people want to swim with dolphins.
4. Conduct an Internet search of dolphin swim operations world wide. Choose three cases in three different countries. Explain how these tours are run and what management guidelines are in place to protect the animals. How do these cases compare with that of Port Phillip Bay?
5. Discuss the attitudes of the various tour operators in relation to the dolphin-swims. For example, how do the views of Martin Mackinnon and Judy Muir differ? How does Troy Muir feel about the dolphin swimming industry?
6. Conduct a class debate on the following topic: 'Should we be allowed to touch and feed wild animals? Discuss some of the potential problems if wild animals become too used to people.'
7. Judy Muir faces a daily dilemma in that she wants to show tourists the dolphins in order to educate people, but at the same time her business may in fact be damaging the animals she loves. Hold a class debate to examine if it is possible to simultaneously exploit and conserve the animals of Port Phillip Bay.
8. Conduct research and then hold a class debate on the topic: 'Should we be allowed to keep dolphins in captivity?'

9. The dolphins are protected by the Whale Watching guidelines and the tour operators' Code of Practice. Design a poster showing the regulations that you think are adequate to protect the dolphins. Add in your own guidelines to further protect the dolphins and seals.

10. In the film, we see a seal with a plastic bag wrapped around its neck. We later hear how the seal had to be shot by wildlife officers. How could we prevent rubbish ending up in our oceans? As a class activity, design and implement a campaign for your local community to reduce rubbish in storm water drains, creeks and waterways.

### Internet Sites for Further Research

Here are a few web sites to get you started on your cyber research:

The Dolphin Research Institute has an informative web site about the dolphins in Port Phillip Bay, plus lots of ways you can help them: [www.dolphinresearch.org.au](http://www.dolphinresearch.org.au)

Polperro Dolphin Swims, who appear in the documentary, have a web site where you can send messages to the crew, and hear about their latest adventures and campaigns: [www.polperro.com.au](http://www.polperro.com.au)

Moonraker Charters, who also appear in the documentary, have a web site too: [www.moonrakercharters.com.au](http://www.moonrakercharters.com.au)

The Department of Conservation and Land Management, who control the permits for the Monkey Mia Visitor centre, have a web site which will tell you about the dolphins that come in to be fed at Monkey Mia in WA: [www.calm.wa.gov.au/plants\\_animalsmammal\\_bottlenose\\_dolphin.html](http://www.calm.wa.gov.au/plants_animalsmammal_bottlenose_dolphin.html)

Also see: [www.monkeymia.com.au/resort/dolphins.html](http://www.monkeymia.com.au/resort/dolphins.html)

At the Tangalooma Wild Dolphin Resort in Moreton Bay, just near Brisbane, tourists can come to feed the dolphins at dusk. This is carefully controlled by rangers and administered under a special permit. They have an educational web site where you can learn about the dolphins that visit the resort. There are also suggestions for school projects: [www.tangalooma.com/dolphinweb/index.htm](http://www.tangalooma.com/dolphinweb/index.htm)

The Dolphin Discovery Centre is run by a group of dedicated volunteers in the small city of Bunbury, south of Perth in Western Australia. Visitors can swim and snorkel here with the dolphins of Koombana Bay, but are not allowed to touch, chase or feed them: [www.dolphindiscovery.com.au](http://www.dolphindiscovery.com.au)

Check the recreation and tourism section of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Victoria and search under 'dolphins' to see what you can learn: [www.nre.vic.gov.au](http://www.nre.vic.gov.au)

From marine diversity to ocean facts or whale spotting in Australia, this site provides loads of information on Australia's marine environment: [www.abc.net.au/oceans/alive.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/oceans/alive.htm)

Seaworld is a large marine theme park on the Gold Coast where dolphins are trained to perform for tourists and it is possible to touch dolphins in captivity: [www.seaworld.com.au](http://www.seaworld.com.au)

The Dolphin Society is based in Sydney Harbour and runs dolphin encounters for all groups at Port Stephens, NSW. The Society aims to promote protection of the dolphins as well as their potential for healing many human ailments: [www.dolphinsoc.org](http://www.dolphinsoc.org)

International Dolphin Watch is a UK-based international dolphin conservation movement founded by Dr Horace Dobbs. International Dolphin Watch is a non-profit or-

ganization dedicated to the study and care of dolphins, especially their relationship with humans: [www.idw.org/](http://www.idw.org/)

### Internet Sites Related to Dolphin Assisted Therapy

Try entering the words 'dolphin assisted therapy' into your search engine and see how many sites come up. Most of them are in the USA, but see how many other countries are now promoting dolphins for healing. Explore.

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#### DOLPHIN MANIA

Duration: 55 minutes

Language: English

2001

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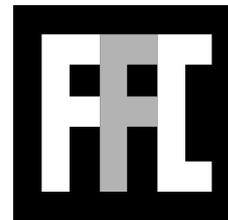
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#### About the writers:

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Photographs courtesy Sally Ingleton and Troy Muir.



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