



The Islands and the Whales Discussion Guide

Director: Mike Day
Year: 2016
Time: 90 min

You might know this director from:

This is the debut feature film from this director. Day previously directed “The Guga Hunters of Ness” (2011), a 59-minute-long documentary.

FILM SUMMARY

The sight of the jagged cliffs of the Faroe Islands rising out of the North Atlantic in the opening sequence of *THE ISLANDS AND THE WHALES* reminds us of a land lost in time. In reality, it is a country torn between its past and its future. Director Day’s feature-length debut introduces us to a remote nation that serves as a barometer of our changing culture, climate, and oceans as the Faroese walk the line between the local and the global, between what was and what is becoming of our world.

THE ISLANDS AND THE WHALES takes us to the hearth of the Faroese home with intimate access to the lives of a number of Faroese people, including a young father who spends his days fishing and hunting seabirds, a puffin expert who mourns the dwindling number of native birds, and Doctor Pál Weihe who has spent the past three decades studying the alarming levels of mercury among the Faroese.

But this film is more than just the story of one small island nation’s present plight and the ethical questions behind whaling and seabird hunting. Globalization has brought us together, and our decisions not only effect our own culture, but the whole world. In the case of the Faroese, the age-old practice of eating pilot whale meat is now threatening the health of future generations, as mercury levels skyrocket due to our polluted oceans.

Interweaving protest, folklore, family, environmental activism and a search for facts, *THE ISLANDS AND THE WHALES* is a meditation on the complexity of modern life and the disconnect from nature caused by the expanding global economic system. As the world becomes more interconnected and cultural identities are forced to shift, this film explores the implications of the emerging global design.

FILM THEMES

By portraying a small island nation and the dilemmas it is forced to face, **THE ISLANDS AND THE WHALES** extends the dialogue with implications for each and every individual on this planet.

HUMANS AND NATURE

“Our ancestors were at one with nature,” a Faroese narrator explains, speaking of the invisible Huldúfólk, an ancient people that lived hand in hand with the natural world. Now, however, it seems that humanity is heading in the opposite direction. In the words of one Faroese, “Modern man became the enemy of nature.” **THE ISLANDS AND THE WHALES** looks closely at the interaction between human and nature and a cultural identity linked to hunting. But this identity is now threatened, seabird populations are disappearing, whale meat is tainted by mercury, everything essential to survival is available at the supermarket, and people from across the globe protest their cultural practices.

CULTURAL IDENTITY

As the Sea Shepherds arrive to protest whaling, one person states: “They intrude on our food. That’s no small thing.” Yet, even the Faroese Doctor Weihe meets resistance as he urges people to stop eating contaminated meat. Whale is no longer essential to Faroese survival, as it once was, but is still intricately connected to their identity. Eating whale is a point of pride, a way in which they honor their ancestry. “It’s been a personal dilemma to take part in something that will change the Faroese identity,” Weihe states. Identity is created over time and generations making it difficult to suddenly remove aspects of one’s heritage.

THE GLOBALIZED WORLD

The world is less and less a collection of separate entities and cultures leading disconnected lives. Technological advancements bring us closer together, and one country’s pollutants can have dangerous effects across the globe. With each step forward, we have the choice to make the world more or less hospitable, to consider our environmental impact or not. Elevated pollution levels in an isolated island nation serve as a stark reminder that the bright face of globalization—with all its positive consequences—has negative consequences as well, ones that become increasingly difficult to ignore.

HUNTING: SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

On the surface it seems simple to push for the discontinuation of whaling and seabird hunting, considering the problematic nature of hunting such a sophisticated animal, the rising mercury levels in the meat, and the dramatic drop in the bird population. To the Faroese, losing the tradition of the hunt is losing a piece of their cultural identity and way of life. How the future Faroese generations will approach whale and seabird hunting is still unclear, with heritage, health, and eco-systems at the forefront of their minds. As one man reminds us, “The change is so big that people back then wouldn’t dream this much would change.” **THE ISLANDS AND THE WHALES** reminds us that no issue is simple, so tread softly and learn.

“Maybe we should be a barometer for the rest of the planet. There are no industrial countries nearby, so if our food is so contaminated by them, it must be really bad elsewhere.”

Local Faroese man

“In the past nature was a giant and we humans were so small, but today it’s the other way around.”

Puffin expert

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. How much did you know about the Faroe Islands before watching *THE ISLANDS AND THE WHALES*? Do you think that you now have a better understanding of this island nation? If you haven't before, do you have any interest in visiting?
2. What do you think was the central issue of the film? Beyond offering a portrait of the changing nature of life in the Faroe Islands, what other issues were touched upon in the film's narrative?
3. Before watching the film, what were your views on whaling and/or the consumption of whale meat? Did your views change after watching the film?
4. Did you think the director took sides on the whaling issue? Did he favor the Faroese or the Sea Shepherds, or did he offer an unbiased perspective? Discuss your impressions of the scenes when the Sea Shepherds met with the Faroese, both on the beach during the hunt and in the press conference.
5. Discuss the relationship between food and identity. Are there any culinary traditions in your culture that stir up strong memories? How does food connect us to our heritage and inform our identity?
6. How connected are you to nature? What survival skills—those used to sustain yourself out in the natural elements—do you possess? Do you think the average individual requires these skills in our modern world? Has humanity evolved past the need for these skills?
7. Do you think Doctor Pál Weihe was taking the best approach in educating his people on the risks of eating whale meat? Was he too relaxed or too strict? How would you handle the situation differently?
8. Do you eat fish? If so, do you consider yourself educated on the varying levels of mercury in certain fish species? Do we have reason to be concerned about mercury levels in our food?
9. Do you agree with this statement made by the film's puffin expert: "In the past nature was a giant and we humans were so small, but today it's the other way around"? Have we surpassed the power of nature?
10. Discuss both the positive and negative sides of globalization, specifically in relation to the impacts of globalization on a small, isolated nation such as the Faroe Islands. Were the Faroese better off before electric lighting and supermarkets arrived? Could they have remained healthy and detached from the rest of us? Or do the far-reaching effects of globalization make it impossible for any group of people to remain isolated from the rest of the world?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Prior to working on THE ISLANDS AND THE WHALES, director Mike Day filmed “The Guga Hunters of Ness” about Scottish fishermen who travel out in stormy conditions to hunt a prized seabird. During one of these shoots, he met a group of Faroese sailors and went to visit their islands a couple of years later. He wanted to tell a story about the relationship between humans and nature, and found it there.
- Director Day and his team were the first outsiders to descend the Faroese cliffs at night during a gannet hunt. Early the following morning, they filmed their first pilot whale grind.
- Located halfway between Norway and Iceland in the North Atlantic Sea, the Faroe Islands consist of 18 major islands occupying around 540 sq. mi. (1,400 sq km). After nearly 800 years as part of the Kingdom of Norway, Denmark was granted control of the islands in 1814, along with Iceland and Greenland. Since 1948 the Faroe Islands have been a self-governing country within the Danish Realm, with control over their own public services, welfare, and taxation.
- McDonald’s fast food chain has yet to make an appearance on the Faroe Islands. There is, however, a single Burger King in Torshavn.
- There is not a single prison located on the Faroe Islands, only a detention center for light sentences. Criminals serving longer sentences are shipped off to prisons in Denmark.
- The 2015 population of the Faroe Islands was just under 50,000. Recent DNA analysis found that 87% of male Faroese lineage was Scandinavian, with 84% of female Scottish. Faroese (which sounds similar to a certain Norwegian dialect) is the first language spoken on the islands, although Danish is also widely spoken. As the economy is almost entirely dependent on fishing and fish farming, it remains vulnerable, and Denmark provides 13% of the islands’ national income in the form of economic aid.
- Legendary for its volatile weather, Faroese expressions include: “If you don’t like the weather, wait five minutes,” and “It’s raining pilot whales.”
- Pilot whales are members of the dolphin family, sometimes referred to as blackfish. Males can be up to 20 feet (6m) long and weigh up to 3 tons, while females are smaller at 16 feet (5m) and 1.5 tons. An adult pilot whale may eat up to 30 lbs. (14kg) of squid per day. The average lifespan is 45 for males and 60 for females.
- Pilot whale drive hunts—or grindadráp—date back to 1584. Although numbers fluctuate, around 1,000 whales are killed on an annual basis over the course of approx. 10 grinds.
- A total of 260 species of seabirds have been found on the Faroe Islands, with around 110 species currently residing there. The tjaldur, or oystercatcher, is the national bird, and its arrival in early March signals the start of spring.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Play** your part in reducing mercury emissions, which end up in our oceans and have overwhelmingly harmful effects for us all. [Mindfully](#) offers practical, everyday recommendations to put in effect.
2. **Watch** “[The Grind: Whaling in the Faroe Islands](#),” a short documentary offering footage of the Faroese whale hunt, with both pro and anti-whalers.
3. **Help** to protect our increasingly fragile seabird populations across the globe, to stop them from plummeting into extinction. Most countries have bird protection organizations: Most countries have bird protection organizations: [Audubon](#) (U.S.), [RSPB](#) (U.K.), [BirdLife](#) (global), to name a few.
4. **Educate** yourself on the Faroe Islands and Faroese culture. Information equals powerful humility.

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