

Educator's Guide for *The Eye of the Whale*

Written and illustrated by **Jennifer O'Connell**
www.JenniferOConnellArt.com - www.TilburyHouse.com

On a cool December morning off the coast of San Francisco, a local fisherman radioed a distress call to shore. He had discovered a humpback whale tangled in hundreds of yards of crab-trap lines, struggling to stay at the surface to breathe. A team of volunteers answered the call and four divers risked their lives to rescue the enormous animal. What followed was a rare and remarkable demonstration of animal behavior. The whale swam around the divers in joyous circles, then gently nudged and looked directly at each diver. The divers say that it was one of the most fantastic moments of their lives.

We all know that a good story can spark a reader's curiosity. And when students have an emotional connection with a book, it inspires them to delve deeper to find out and learn more about a subject. *The Eye of the Whale* is an excellent catalyst for further exploration about marine mammals and the ocean. It gives readers the facts of the dramatic rescue and invites them to think about what these actions meant. Below are some ideas for activities and discussion topics.

***The Eye of the Whale* will help inspire classroom discussions about:**

- Animal emotions: are they similar to human emotions? Are they different for different kinds of animals? What is anthropomorphism?
- Protecting whales and other marine mammals.
- How sick and injured marine mammals are rescued and rehabilitated.
- Why oceans are so important for overall planet health, and what can be done to protect them.
- Advocacy opportunities for ocean-related environmental issues that exist for kids.
- The meaning of compassion: how the divers showed compassion toward the whale and how children in the class have shown compassion for other humans and animals.

Language Arts Ideas

Compare *The Eye of the Whale* with Jennifer O'Connell's earlier whale book: *A Garden of Whales*. Which one is fiction and which one is nonfiction, and why?

In what ways did Jennifer O'Connell show what was happening in the story with pictures - instead of words - in *The Eye of the Whale*?

Look at several spreads in the book. What would the crew members be saying to one another? When they are underwater, how would they communicate with one another? Form into groups and create skits with dialog or other ways of communicating, like hand motions and wordless signals, when acting out several consecutive scenes in the book.

Ask questions about the story: How do you think the fisherman felt when he first discovered the tangled whale? Why did the rescue crew have to hurry? How do you think they felt when the whale nudged them?

Challenge students to find out more about the rescue. There are many articles on the internet (google: humpback whale rescue 2005) and even a recorded interview of the rescue divers on NPR's Animal Planet: <http://www.radiolab.org/story/91701-animal-minds/> (the whale rescue part begins at the 4-minute mark).

Ask students to pick one of the many dangers that marine mammals face such as pollution, boat propellers, fishing nets and lines, sonar and illegal hunting and learn more about it. Ask them to write a short paragraph about it and create a picture on the rest of the page that supports their paragraph.

A Math Activity - How Big is a Humpback Whale?

Using rope or masking tape and yardsticks and rulers, the children measure and outline a humpback's 16-foot long and 4-foot wide flipper, its 18-foot wide tail and its entire 50-foot long body. Students can compare the size of the whale or its flippers and tail to familiar objects that they know such as a bicycle, car, school bus or their own body! This will help them appreciate the enormous size of the humpback whale featured in the book. If possible, bring in a large grapefruit on the day the class is doing this. This is the approximate size of a humpback's eye!

Geography and Watersheds

Look at a map of the United States that shows all the rivers and streams leading to the oceans. The children can search online for "Maryland Watersheds" and mark their town and watershed on the map. The children can then draw a line to show how the run-off water in their neighborhood flows to a stream, then to a river and finally, the ocean.

On the same map they can locate where *The Eye of the Whale* rescue took place, 18 miles off the coast of San Francisco, CA, near the Farallon Islands. There are humpback whales in the Atlantic Ocean too!

Science and Whales

Scientists learned from looking at humpbacks' brains that they have the same spindle cells that human brains have. Spindle cells are responsible for our ability to feel emotion, so whales may be capable of feeling emotions also. Ask the children to name some emotions that they have felt and invite the class to make faces that show these different emotions: happy, sad, scared, surprised.

How Marine Animals Stay Warm

Whales and seals are warm-blooded animals and depend on a thick layer of body fat called blubber to keep them warm in the cold seas. The blubber on a large whale can be up to two feet thick. It is almost impossible for the cold to get through the blubber and chill the whale. To learn how blubber works, the children can make a "blubber mitt" and see how it protects from the cold.

You'll need: One cup solid shortening such as Crisco, Ziploc-type bags (without sliders), some duct tape, a basin of cold, icy water, or a basin of snow.

Put one cup of shortening into a Ziplock bag. Turn a second bag inside out and put it inside the bag with the shortening, being sure to reverse the zipper tracks. Join the bags together at the top by zipping them to each other. For added protection, you can seal the bags around the zipper with duct tape. Push the shortening around from the outside to distribute it evenly in the "mitt." For each mitt, make an empty mitt without shortening, so you can compare it with the insulated one.

Place one hand in an empty mitt and one in an insulated mitt (with the shortening) and then place both hands in a basin of cold, icy water. The "blubber" mitt will protect your hand from the cold. Whale blubber acts the same way to help maintain the animal's body heat in cold water. (Adapted from *Giving Back to the Earth: A Teacher's Guide for Project Puffin and other Seabird Studies*.)

Arts and Crafts Activities

Humpback Whale Puzzle

The children first take the two line drawings of humpback whales, one with no labels and one with the labeled body parts, and color them in. Then using glue sticks, they can paste the pictures on both sides of a sheet of tag board or recycled cardboard, making sure that the whales are facing the same direction. Using scissors, the children cut up the side with the printed words into puzzle pieces, keeping each word on a puzzle piece. They then have two puzzles or a puzzle that becomes a guessing game. When the side that has the words is face down and they lift the pieces up, they can try to identify and find out what the different body parts are. (downloadable pdfs are on my site: www.JenniferOConnellArt.com, under "Activities.")

Illustrate a scene from the *The Eye of the Whale*

After looking at the book, children can create a drawing of an additional scene in the story that they think would add to the book, or change the book from non-fiction into fiction.

Whale Mobile

Draw several different whales on construction paper or heavy tag board and cut them out, making small holes at the top of each whale. Tie string or thread to each whale and then tie the string to a branch, dowel or coat hanger so that the whales hang down at different lengths.

Older students might enjoy creating mobiles with folded Origami whales.

Mural or Bulletin Board Challenge

Classes can create a mural and divide it in half down the middle. On the left side of the mural children use cut-out drawings and/or paintings and collage to illustrate an ocean in distress (bleached out coral, murky water, entangled whales, over-fishing, whale hunts, etc.) They brainstorm all of the influences that endanger our oceans and its animal and plant life.

Examples written along the left side of the mural might include pollution; sonar and other noise

pollution that disorient sea animals; large boat propellers that wound whales; whale entanglement in fishing/crab trap lines; oil slicks, etc.

On the right side of the mural, the children paste/tape or paint what the ocean would look like with all the destructive forces eliminated. Images might include whales and fish swimming in bright blue water; colorful coral and plant life; recycling containers placed on the shore, a sign saying "Protected Area," etc. The actions taken to help the ocean would be listed on the right side of the mural.

Crayon - Watercolor Resist Underwater Illustration

Children draw an underwater scene with wax crayons. After they have colored in their fish, whales and maybe even the ocean floor, they create the background. In muffin tins or other plastic containers, they add drops of water to bright acrylics or poster paints until they are watery colors. This technique is called a wash. When they brush the wash over the drawing, the background will be colored by the wash, but the crayon colors will stay the same. Watercolors can also be used, if available. The teacher could explain that the water "runs off" the crayon parts of their picture, just like our rain water "runs off" and does not sink into paved areas and roads.

Community Service - Reaching Out

Stream Clean-Up

Help children form crews with their classmates, teachers and/or parents to clean up a local stream, river or creek. By doing so, they will be creating a cleaner ocean for whales and other sea animals, since the water in their stream will eventually end up in the ocean.

A Rain Garden

Help children create a Rain Garden on the school grounds or at a nearby park. It may seem like a small thing to them, but explain that compared to a regular patch of lawn, a rain garden allows about 30% more water to soak into the ground. So the garden helps to prevent storm water runoff from carrying pollutants from streets, parking lots and even lawns into nearby local streams and lakes and eventually the ocean. Here is a good rain garden site: <http://learningstore.uwex.edu/assets/pdfs/GWQ037.pdf>

A School Fundraiser

The children can organize an event called, "Bags, Bottles and Promises," where they set up a table outside the cafeteria and sell reusable water bottles and/or reusable grocery/tote bags. Everyone is invited to write a personal promise on a piece of recycled paper of what they will do to help the earth, that is then tacked on the bulletin board behind the sale table. The multi-colored pieces of paper for this could form a large image of the earth. Some of the "promise" ideas could already be written out on scraps of paper, for which children can choose. At a nearby table, children can decorate and put their names on their bottles and bags. The proceeds from the sale could be contributed to a local environmental organization that the school has voted on or a green addition to the school, like a rain garden (see above.)