

# MVFF EDUCATION



ONE WITH THE WHALE

**CURRICULUM GUIDE**  
GRADES: 6-12

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Dear Educators,

Thank you for attending the 46th Annual Mill Valley Film Festival's screening of *One With the Whale*. We are excited to return in our 2023 fall season with a combination of both in-theater screenings for local schools and online screenings for those of you joining us from afar.

This year, our MVFF Education film selections continue to focus on increasingly relevant issues of global empathy and active citizenship, and we believe this film will be a powerful and engaging text to use in your classroom. These curricular materials are designed to get students to engage deeply with film by the common-core aligned skills of developing an evidence-based interpretation of a text.

The discussion questions on the following page offer a variety of options for fostering small-group or whole-class dialogue. If your students are already familiar with a process of writing evidence-based interpretive essays, consider using the suggested essay prompts for a short writing piece. Additionally, individual handouts for before and after viewing are provided as stand-alone activities to be used individually or in sequence, with a particular emphasis on social-emotional learning. We have also included a handout that provides some context for the film festival experience, which may help to introduce your screening experience.

Thank you so much for your tireless work!

Sincerely,

The CAFILM Education Team

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the central issues addressed in this documentary? What new insight did you gain from the beginning to the end of the film?
2. What are some surprising facts you learned from this film? How do these facts shape your understanding of the central issue of the film?
3. Does this documentary feel objective and/or balanced in its presentation of the issues? Why or why not?
4. Describe a moment or a scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about the scene that was especially compelling for you?
5. What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?
6. If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What would you hope their main takeaway would be?
7. Were there any perspectives relevant to the central issues of the documentary that were not included? How would those voices have changed the film?
8. What is subsistence hunting, and how does it differ from other hunting practices throughout the United States and the world? What does hunting success mean to a remote island community like Gambell, Alaska?
9. Harvesting a bowhead whale is a rite of passage for some Alaska Natives. Explain how this rite of passage is connected to the meaning of the title of the film. What does it mean to become "one with the whale"?
10. What is the symbolic meaning of the bow and arrow referred to in the film? How is the metaphor significant within the Siberian Yupik culture?
11. How does culture influence judgment? Why is it important not to judge another culture's practices based on what you think is "normal" or "acceptable" but rather what people within that culture feel is normal or acceptable in their own context?

## INTERPRETIVE ESSAY PROMPTS

1. The film addresses the impact of the modern world on the Siberian Yupik people and their Alaska Native culture. How can Indigenous people go from thriving to struggling to survive? Who or what is responsible for decimating the whale population, and what are the effects or broader implications for the future?
2. For a remote community like Gambell, connectivity is among the most significant benefits of social media. How was social media weaponized because of the bowhead whale harvest, and what were its real world consequences for the teenager who went from being a hero to his community, to a victim of various political platforms?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Alaska Native Peoples, Native Federation

<https://www.nativefederation.org/alaska-native-peoples/>

For thousands of years Alaska Natives have lived throughout the vast land that became the 49th state. A traditional subsistence lifestyle of hunting, fishing and gathering food has enabled Alaska Natives to thrive in some of the worlds' harshest and most challenging environments.

### Native Movement

<https://www.nativemovement.org/>

Native Movement supports grassroots-led projects that align with our vision to dismantle oppressive systems for all, and that endeavor to ensure social justice, Indigenous Peoples' rights, and the rights of Mother Earth.

### Evaluating News Sources

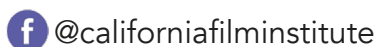
The following links are just some of the published articles that covered the story of 16-year-old Chris Apasingok's whale strike. While it was celebrated by the community when the story was reported, it generated unexpected attention online.

- **"Teenage Gambell whaler under social media fire from noted environmentalist" - Alaska Public Media**  
<https://alaskapublic.org/2017/07/31/teenage-gambell-whaler-under-social-media-fire-from-noted-environmentalist/>
- **"Gambell teenager leads successful whale hunt, brings home 57-foot bowhead" - KTOO**  
<https://www.ktoo.org/2017/04/21/gambell-teenager-leads-successful-whale-hunt-brings-home-57-foot-bowhead/>
- **"Residents Rally behind Teenage Gambell Whaler" - Anchorage Daily News**  
<https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/rural-alaska/2017/05/05/residents-rally-behind-teenage-gambell-whaler/>
- **"The Teenage Whaler's Tale" - High Country News**  
<https://www.hcn.org/issues/49.12/tribal-affairs-a-teenage-whaler-pride-of-his-alaska-village-is-haunted-by-trolls>

## ABOUT CAFILM

The nonprofit California Film Institute celebrates and promotes film as art and education through year-round programming at the independent Christopher B. Smith Rafael Film Center, presentation of the acclaimed Mill Valley Film Festival and DocLands Documentary Film Festival, as well as cultivation of the next generation of filmmakers and audiences through CAFILM Education programs.

Follow the California Film Institute on social media



# STANDARDS

## Common Core State Standards ELA-Literacy

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.7

Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.8

Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.



## ABOUT THE FILM

Hunting whales is a matter of life or death for the Siberian Yupik residents of St. Lawrence, a tiny ice-covered island in the Bering Sea. *One with the Whale* follows the story of Chris Agra Apassingok, a teenager who became the youngest person to harpoon a whale that fed his Alaskan village for months. After the story emerged, he became the target of online hate messages and death threats from animal rights activists who didn't fully understand the accomplishment of this local hero. The social media impact led him to drop out of high school and forced him and his family to fight against genocide and environmental racism while coming to terms with the modern world and preserving their millenia-old practices as subsistence hunters. *One with the Whale* is a heartwarming yet thrilling story of one family's struggle to rebuild their shattered identities and regain a new foothold in both the ancient and modern world.

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS JIM WICKENS & PETE CHELKOWSKI

### Jim Wickens, Director/Cinematographer

Over the last 15 years, Wickens has established himself as one of the world's leading activists and storytellers on the frontline of environmental conflicts. After working for Greenpeace, he started the world's first undercover environmental detective agency. He has outstanding warrants in Japan for his anti-whaling work there, and criminal convictions in Namibia for exposing commercial seal hunts. At the same time, Jim also works closely with Indigenous and coastal communities around the world, fighting for recognition and land rights. His work has been regularly screened on Channel 4 News, Animal Planet, CNN and ITV. His raw and uncompromising style of storytelling has earned him numerous awards, including the Royal Television Society Independent Filmmaker of the Year; the International Foreign Press Award; the Wincott Foundation Award for Journalism; Amnesty International and One World media awards.



### Pete Chelkowski, Director/Cinematographer

Chelkowski has spent the last twenty years shooting, producing and directing long and short form content around the world. He prides himself on telling stories that go beyond entertainment, that open the way people think about themselves and the world around them. His latest project, *Life Below Zero-First Alaskans*, airs on Nat Geo, the only non-fiction series with an all Native American cast. He was commissioned by TNT to shoot *Who Runs the World* for Sara Jessica Parker. He was a field producer and DP for Discovery's *Ocean Warriors*, where he met co-director Jim Wickens. His first feature film was *Carnival Roots*, which explored the clash between Europe and Africa through the lens of Carnival in Trinidad. He produced and created *Fighting Tuna* for Discovery. He was a producer of *I Learn America*, a documentary film about newly arrived immigrant teenagers in their senior year of high school. He regularly works undercover for Ecostorm.

## ABOUT THE SIBERIAN YUPIK PEOPLE

The Siberian Yupik are one of several Indigenous groups living in Alaska, many of whom share ethnic roots. The word *Yupik* comes from the roots *yuk*, meaning "person," and *pik*, meaning "real," so the term "Yupik" means "real person." For the Siberian Yupik, Alaska has been home for thousands of years. The Bering Sea is a harsh climate with challenging access to the resources needed to sustain life. Like all Indigenous groups in North America, the Siberian Yupik people have experienced a drastic shift between their traditional way of life and their contemporary way of life because of the influences of European colonialism. The Siberian Yupik of St. Lawrence island live in villages that are thousands of years old with some access to stores selling imported food from the mainland with which they can supplement their diets. Unfortunately, the high cost of shipping food to such a remote location means that grocery stores are often prohibitively expensive. Most Siberian Yupik and other Alaska Natives still rely on subsistence hunting and fishing as the mainstay of their diet. Subsistence hunting has been their way of life for thousands of years. Their lives and identities revolve around providing food for the village.

# BEFORE VIEWING ANTICIPATION GUIDE

## Directions:

The film you are about to watch is an Indigenous story of resistance. Before watching the film, respond to this anticipation guide to consider some of the themes in the film. Read each statement below. If you agree with the statement, explain why in the left-hand box under the Agree column. If you disagree, explain why in the box under the Disagree column.

**AGREE**

**STATEMENT**

**DISAGREE**

Rites of passage are an important way to stay connected to one's cultural heritage.

Culture influences our thoughts, behaviors, and how we view the world.

Individual cultural values are at play when we respond to situations or scenarios.

A person's beliefs, values, and practices should be understood based on that person's own culture, rather than be judged against the criteria of another.



# BEFORE VIEWING PROS & CONS

**Directions:**

One of the central issues of this film is the power of social media. For the people of this remote village, social media promotes community that can translate into, or promote, offline relationships. Conversely, social media can also lead to cyberbullying that spills into offline life. Use the chart below to make your thinking visible by generating a list of the pros and cons of social media in the modern world.

Topic: Social Media	
Pros	Cons

## DURING VIEWING EMPATHY MAP

**Directions:** In *One with the Whale*, we follow the story of teenage whaler Chris Agra Appasingok. We learn what this rite of passage means to his community, and we witness the reactions from outside of the Siberian Yupik culture. In this empathy map activity, fill out each quadrant to better understand his experience and the effects of cultural influence on others' judgments.

### HEAR

What do the people of Gambell say when Chris brings hunting success to his community? What do the people outside of the community say about him harvesting a bowhead whale?

### SEE

What does Chris's life look like on his native land? What challenges does he face in the community and the wider world?

### FEEL

What are Chris's thoughts and emotions about harvesting a whale? How do those feelings change through the course of the story, and why?

### SAY/DO

How do Chris's actions and words differ between his school life, his home and recreational life, and his hunting life?

# AFTER VIEWING FOUR C'S

**Directions:**

Respond to each prompt in complete sentences, citing specific scenes, events, and dialogue from the film as evidence for your response.

**CONNECTIONS**

What connections do you draw between the film and your own life or other learnings?

**CHALLENGE**

What ideas, positions, or assumptions do you want to challenge or debate in the film?

**CONCEPTS**

What key concepts or ideas do you think are important and worth holding on to from the film?

**CHANGES**

What changes in attitudes, thinking, or action are suggested by the film, either for you or others?

A Thinking Routine Borrowed from Harvard Project Zero's Think Routine Toolbox:  
<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/resources>

# AFTER VIEWING RESPONSE QUESTIONS

**Directions:**

Respond to each question, referring to specific scenes, events, and dialogue from the film as evidence for your interpretation.

1. What is life like for a teenager in the remote community of Gambell, Alaska? What similarities to your own life can you recognize or relate to? What differences surprised you?

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2. What is cultural relativism? Why do you think it is important not to hold another culture to our own standards of right or wrong, strange or normal?

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3. Did the film succeed in helping you to understand the cultural practices of another group in its own cultural context? How?

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4. If you could send Chris a message about what his story meant to you and post it on social media, what would you share with him knowing your post would be read by a wider audience and become part of a larger discussion?

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5. Revisit your responses on the Anticipation Guide. Has your opinion on any statement changed? Explain what details from the movie either changed or affirmed your prior knowledge and beliefs.

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# EXTENSION ACTIVITY

## ISSUES, INDIVIDUALS, IMPACTS

### Directions:

1. Identify the central issue in the film in the center box.
2. Identify two individuals in the film or in real life who have a connection to that issue.
3. Identify three ways that issue impacts each individual, or way that individual impacts the issue.

INDIVIDUAL ONE	ISSUE	INDIVIDUAL TWO
Impact 1:		Impact 1:
Impact 2:		Impact 2:
Impact 3:		Impact 3:

# EXTENSION ACTIVITY

## REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

**Directions:**

*One with the Whale* is the true story of one family's struggle to fight against genocide and environmental racism. Your assignment is to do some additional investigative journalism after watching the film in order to separate fact from feeling.

1. **Research.** What is the central issue of the film?
2. **Facts and events.** What are the facts and events of the situation? What evidence from the film confirms them?
3. **Thoughts and feelings.** Identify the thoughts and feelings of the characters/participants in the situation. What evidence confirms them?
4. **Clarity.** Record what is clear from the film in the column below.
5. **Need to check.** Record what may still be unclear or lacks sufficient evidence from the film in the column below.
6. **Research.** Before you make your best judgment about this story, do some additional research and try to clarify what is unclear or lacks sufficient evidence.
7. **Judgment.** Make your best judgment about the situation, based on this information.

	CLEAR	NEED TO CHECK
<b>FACTS &amp; EVENTS</b> What happened? What evidence from the film confirms this?		
<b>THOUGHTS &amp; FEELINGS</b> How did the characters think or feel about it?		

**My Best Judgment on the Issue:**

# EXTENSION ACTIVITY

## CULTURAL ICEBERG

### What is the cultural iceberg?

When we see an iceberg, the portion that is visible above water is, in reality, only a small piece of a much larger whole. Similarly, people often think of culture as the numerous observable characteristics of a group that we can \*see\* with our eyes, be it their food, dances, music, arts, or greeting rituals. The reality, however, is that these are merely an external manifestation of the deeper and broader components of culture—the complex ideas and deeply-held preferences and priorities known as attitudes and values.

### Directions:

1. **Artifact.** Have students bring an object or picture that represents their culture.
2. **Share.** Have each student explain how this artifact represents their culture.
3. **Iceberg.** Draw the image of an iceberg on a flipchart and place it on a table. Add all the objects or pictures on the tip above the water.
4. **Explain.** Explain the iceberg model of culture: What is easily visible only represents 10% of the culture.
5. **List.** Generate a list of different features of culture. For each feature of culture, think of one example common to people in the United States or in the country where students were born.
6. **Relocate.** Ask students to relocate the different features of culture either above or below the waterline. Remember that what is above and visible is considered observable behavior (10 %) while beneath the line are the invisible beliefs, values, and taboos that are transmitted through culture (90%).
7. **Discussion.** Facilitate a discussion on the relationship between the visible and invisible aspects of culture. Determine how the objects brought represent the values and beliefs that are not visible (the 90% part of the iceberg), and write them in the iceberg below the water. Discuss the behaviors that might be caused by the same values. Likewise, think of similar behaviors that might be caused by different or opposing values.
8. **Conclusion.** When encountering another culture, we tend to interpret the behavior observed based on our own iceberg, our own set of values and beliefs, which may be the cause for culture shock. It is important to keep in mind that the behavior demonstrated is rooted in values that are not always clearly visible.

### The Cultural Iceberg Visual Aid

[https://adeaconsmusing.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/151015.ucc\\_.culture.iceberg.pdf](https://adeaconsmusing.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/151015.ucc_.culture.iceberg.pdf)



# ABOUT FILM FESTIVALS



An opening night screening at the Mill Valley Film Festival.

## What is a film festival?

A film festival is an event in which multiple movies are presented over the course of one or several days. Depending on the size of the festival, all of the screenings may take place in a single theater or may involve multiple venues throughout a city. Festivals also include special events like panel discussions with filmmakers and actors. Typically, filmmakers submit their works to a festival, where a team of curators selects the best entries for inclusion in the festival. For independent and international filmmakers, festivals are often an important way to raise awareness of a film, generate an audience, and/or attract a studio to purchase the rights to distribute a film in a wider release. Acceptance into a major festival can add significant prestige to a film, with some festival awards (such as the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or) considered among the highest honors a film can receive.

There are many film festivals through-

out the world, with some focusing on particular themes, such as highlighting LGBTQ films/filmmakers, specific cultural groups, or particular genres. While some of the more famous festivals may be in distant locations, there are hundreds of small festivals spread through every corner of the world and, increasingly, festivals are using streaming access to make it easier for the public to view their curated programs.

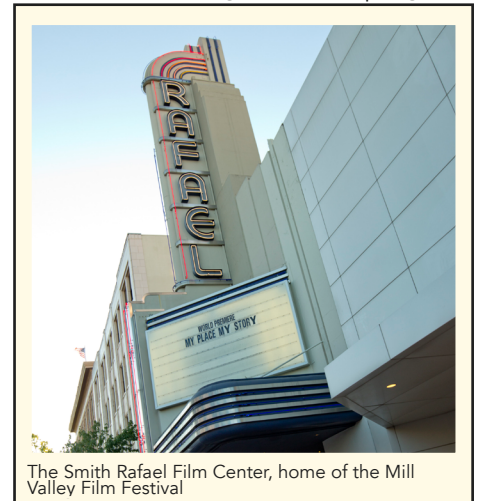
## History of the Mill Valley Film Festival

Since founding the Mill Valley Film Festival in 1977, Executive Director Mark Fishkin has shepherded this once small, three-day showcase into an eleven-day, internationally acclaimed cinema event presenting a wide variety of new films from around the world in an engaged, community setting.

The festival has an impressive track record of launching new films and new filmmakers, and has earned a reputation as a filmmakers' festival

by celebrating the best in American independent and foreign films, alongside high-profile and prestigious award contenders. The relaxed and non-competitive atmosphere surrounding MVFF, gives filmmakers and audiences alike the opportunity to share their work and experiences in a collaborative and convivial setting.

Each year the festival welcomes more than 200 filmmakers, representing more than 50 countries. Screening sections include world cinema, US cinema, documentaries, family films, and shorts programs. Annual festival initiatives include Active Cinema, a forum for films that aim to engage audiences and transform ideas into action; Mind the Gap, a platform for inclusion and equity; and ¡Viva el Cine!, a showcase of Latin American and Spanish-language films.. Festival guests also enjoy an exciting selection of Tributes, Spotlights and Galas throughout the program.



The Smith Rafael Film Center, home of the Mill Valley Film Festival

## Questions to Consider:

1. What is the purpose of a film festival? What are the benefits for filmmakers? For the audience? For the community?
2. How might the films at a festival differ from the films available to watch at your local movie theater?
3. What qualities do you think festival curators might look for in a film? If you are watching a festival film with a class/school group, what aspects of the film do you think made it appealing to the curators?

## Get Involved!

Many film festivals, including the Mill Valley Film Festival, have student film categories. If you are a filmmaker, explore FilmFreeway ([www.filmfreeway.com](http://www.filmfreeway.com)) for a database of worldwide film festivals where you can submit your film. The call for entries for MVFF opens in late February and closes in June. Youth filmmakers do not have to pay an entry fee. MVFF also offers many opportunities for volunteering. Find out more at <https://www.cafilm.org/volunteer/>.