

# whale dreamers

A powerful new film showcases the elegance and wisdom of our very own indigenous culture, reveals the intelligence and compassion of the Southern Right Whale, and calls us to awaken to our purpose and work together for our shared future.

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It's opening night at the historic Cremorne Orpheum cinema in Sydney and Jack Thompson, narrator of the new film *Whaledreamers*, opens the film to the world in front of a packed house. *Whaledreamers* is an engaging and fascinating documentary, a unique experience that takes you on a journey into the world of Aboriginal Dreaming. The film takes you into a world of imagination, even into an experience of your own past and future. It can truly seem like you are watching a dream, or living through it.

*Whaledreamers* is the story of the Mirning tribe from the Nullarbor coast of South Australia and their kinship with the southern right whales of the Great Australian Bight. This dispossessed Aboriginal tribe struggles back from the brink of extinction, reconnecting with sacred land and identity; an identity that is built on their relationship with the whale. Their journey parallels the search for meaning and a sustainable future for us all, faced with our own potential extinction, originally of nuclear holocaust and now of environmental destruction and climate change.

Taken from their land, the Mirning were forcibly separated and resettled on far-away missions, re-educated and placed into jobs of Western society in a process now infamously referred to as the Stolen Generation. If this were not enough, their land was given to another dispossessed tribe, taken from the deserts of Maralinga to the north. In the 1950s, non-indigenous society had turned Maralinga into a radioactive wasteland through testing of atomic weapons. Stoically, a few of the Mirning managed to hold on to some of their stories and traditions. In the 1980s and 90s, they secretly began to revisit their lands for ceremony and establish connection with their totem, the whales.

Many people report that an experience with a whale or dolphin is "mind-blowing" or even life-changing. Like indigenous whale tribes of the entire globe, the Mirning believe that dolphins and whales are symbols for us, teaching us how to live in complete harmony with our environment. These immensely intelligent creatures have lived in a state of balance in the oceans of the world for over 50 million years. Now, as a result of pollution, several countries recommencing whaling, the collapse of fisheries and potentially catastrophic global warming, the future of these majestic animals hangs in the balance.

The Mirning struggled on. But how do you find your identity and re-establish rituals and traditions, gained over thousands of years, that have been cut off and lost in a few generations? Working in coastal indigenous communities across the globe, director Kim Kindersley had been producing dolphin and whale documentary footage for seven years. When he heard about the plight of the Mirning and the history of their deep connection with the whale, he flew from his home in the UK to meet them.

Mirning elder Bunna Lawrie took him to their sacred place, Whale Rock, an astonishing landform jutting into the ocean that looks like a 20-metre high beached whale. The place is called Mirrinagu, the Head of the Bight. Here, for perhaps thousands of years, the Mirning communed with the whales and learned from them, cementing their tribal identity, stories and culture. Kim stood on a rock shelf at Mirrinagu while Bunna called to the whales. At that moment, a southern right whale came right up to the shelf and breached, spraying a fine mist over Kim and filling him with a sense of awe and purpose.

Kim decided to call on a network of indigenous elders and whale-talkers from all over the globe to form a supportive gathering to help the Mirning people. The gathering included Pauline Tangiora, an elder from the Aotearoa (New Zealand) tribe that was made famous by the film *Whale Rider*, spiritual man Johnny Burrmula from the Yolngu in Arnhem Land, and 83 other knowledgeable and committed people from around the globe. Kim's long-time friend, singer-songwriter and whale activist Julian Lennon, came to meet the Mirning to see how he could help. Julian was deeply moved when the Mirning presented him with a symbolic white feather, fulfilling a prophecy that his father John had made 40 years before! With financial support from Julian, Kim documented 'The Gathering' on film, and so the *Whaledreamers* project was born.

Jack Thompson, Aussie film legend and ambassador for Reconciliation since 2003, narrates the film in his well-loved, mellifluous voice. Jack says it's a powerful film. "It >





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shines a light onto a truth not often realised - the wonderful gift we have of indigenous culture in this country, a culture very few of us have experienced. *Whaledreamers* shows us the wisdom and gentleness of this culture, and what it brings to us all, especially at this difficult time in our history."

Jack's relationship with Aboriginal Australia began when he was nine. His step-father, radio producer John Thompson, travelled to Arnhem Land to produce an ABC feature on indigenous community and culture. "The stories he brought back from the trip moved me," says Jack, who has starred in films that have opened a door on Aboriginal Australia, including *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* in 1978. For 10 years now, Jack has travelled to Arnhem Land each year to attend Garma, the largest indigenous music festival in Australia. "I'm the only non-indigenous person on the Festival Council. It's a great honour," he says.

Garma is the inspiration of Mandawuy Yunupingu from the band Yothu Yindi. 'Garma' means people of different beliefs coming together to negotiate knowledge in a respectful, learning environment. The appointed principal of the Yirrkala Community School where he grew up, Mandawuy set about implementing a radical, both-ways curriculum combining Balandá (European) and Yolngu (Aboriginal) educational processes that were designed to present students with the best aspects of both cultures. The same philosophy underpins Garma. The ancient sound of the yidaki (didgeridu) is a call to all people to come together in unity. This call announces the annual Garma festival.

The Yolngu concept of Yothu Yindi recognises duality and fosters balance where there is difference. It encompasses the two sides of a world in which balance is maintained: a balance between people and land that has ensured their survival for tens of thousands of years. It is this same calling to unity that is the theme of *Whaledreamers*. Jack feels that the project of Reconciliation is gathering momentum. "It's better now than it ever has been," he says. The Gathering on Mirning land has people of all

backgrounds supporting indigenous Australians in their healing and reconnection with their identity and culture. "*Whaledreamers* shows us how non-indigenous people are starting to put the pieces of their own history back together by supporting members of the Stolen Generations to rebuild their culture." Jack shares the concern of many about the future of non-indigenous people. "The issue of climate change is a serious one and it brings all people together for our very survival." But on this topic, Jack is hopeful: "Like the Mirning, we can overcome our historical circumstances. We can come back from the edge of extinction ourselves."

Just as the lives of the Mirning are being transformed through access to land and culture, healthy, long-term indigenous communities are secured by self-sufficiency in food and shelter. The Jack Thompson Foundation, of which Jack is the patron, has been formed to teach young indigenous people in remote communities how to "source materials sustainably from their natural environment and build their own decent housing." In the spirit of reconciliation, Jack invites anyone with trade skills wishing to train indigenous people, or anyone wishing to support their work financially, to email the foundation on [jackthompsonfoundation@bigpond.com](mailto:jackthompsonfoundation@bigpond.com).

As Jack prepares to race off to support yet another community project - judging a competition of emerging musicians at his beloved Pub, the Gearin Hotel in Katoomba, NSW - he reinforces his message that everyone in Australia can play a part. "It's an old adage, but I think it applies now more than ever: think global, act local. Get involved in your local Landcare group to help the environment. Contact Reconciliation Australia, as there are so many good projects to get involved in." There is always something happening at Jack's pub - live music, special movie screenings and even poetry readings by Jack himself. And look out for Jack in two big new films - *Moa's Last Dancer* and Baz Luhrman's epic romance, *Australia*.

Kim Kindersley's next film project is called *It's Time*. This will document worldwide events that have the goal of building a sustainable future, such as *The Circle Up Now* project ([www.circleupnow.org](http://www.circleupnow.org)), working with Amnesty International and 'The Elders', including Nelson Mandela and Kofi Anan. This is a huge, global, grassroots campaign to inspire the world to uphold the declaration of Human Rights. *It's Time* will show how we are actually much closer to building a sustainable future than we realise.

*Whaledreamers* is a powerful film of indigenous and non-indigenous people coming together to celebrate a magnificent culture, the whale, the natural world and our own shared future. One of the most significant films yet made on the subject of Reconciliation and Aboriginal Dreaming, *Whaledreamers* is a must-see for all who wish to be part of a sustainable Australia and world. But the last word belongs to Jack: "*Whaledreamers* calls us all together to act together for our common good. Let's celebrate that." \*