

RITUALS, MYTHS AND LEGENDS

18. Tale of a whale

Objective: Students will gain an awareness of the different myths and legends surrounding whales from different cultures.

Level: K-3, 4-7

Background: The relationship between humans and whales is constantly changing. Legends, myths and rituals associated with whales have originated from many cultures throughout the world, and whales are a part of the folklore of virtually every seafaring civilization. The Greeks believed that dolphins were the friends and helpers of humans; to them, killing a dolphin was as morally wrong as killing a human.

In Scandinavian countries, people believed that there were good whales and evil whales. It was considered very dangerous to mention the names of evil whales while at sea, so they were referred to as *Great Fish*. Sailors thought that if an evil whale's name was mentioned, the whale would appear and try to destroy the boat; anyone who used the name of an evil whale was deprived of his food.

Vietnamese fishermen believed that whales were sent by the God of the Waters to protect sailors and to carry shipwrecked mariners on their backs to safety. They believed that every time a whale died, the rain would pour and the winds would howl for three days. River dolphins in the Amazon are considered sacred and thought of as the protectors of people. A person would never attempt to capture a dolphin or eat its flesh.

During the Middle Ages, most stories and pictures of whales were not based on visual observations but on second-hand descriptions of creatures that took on monstrous proportions. Many people believed that whales had huge teeth and that their blowholes were like chimneys that expelled torrents of water. Artists moved the baleen from the mouth of the whale to the side of its neck, where it formed a bristly fringe or mane. Many also believed that cetaceans enjoyed the sound of music, especially the pipes. There are numerous drawings and stories of sailors attempting to calm fierce whales with musical instruments.

The oral histories of northwest coast First Peoples tell of magic ancestors, some of whom were once whales. Magic whales travelled effortlessly through the oceans, often in the form of canoes, until they came ashore at a favoured spot. There they transformed into humans and founded villages. The human descendants of these magic whales pay tribute to them by depicting them in story, song, dance and art.

Though coastal aboriginal people of British Columbia hunted some species of whales, they always revered and respected the spirit and majesty of the whale.

British Columbia's First People never hunted Killer Whales, believing that the souls of departed noble chiefs and great hunters resided in them. But some mythic Killer Whales were malicious - they were changed into reefs and their dorsal fins, now hardened to rock, continue to threaten sea-faring folk.

On the northwest coast of North America, Thunderbird, the most powerful of the supernatural

animal beings, killed whales for food. Under the wings of Thunderbird were lightning-snakes that flashed out to kill a whale, which the Thunderbird then carried away and ate. A few people have seen Thunderbird's lofty eyrie, surrounded by piles of whale bones.

The Nuxalk (Bella Coola) people have a story of a giant Killer Whale saving people from a great flood. When the world was young the Nuxalk people were driven from their houses by a great flood. Some of the people fled to high ground on a hilltop near Bella Coola village to escape the flood, but the water kept rising and was soon threatening to overtake them. As the waters rose to the place where the people had taken refuge, a giant Killer Whale appeared. The people climbed inside the Killer Whale, which was as big as a house inside, and were cared for until the waters subsided. When the waters retreated, the Killer Whale returned the people to their homes.

Level: K-3**Materials:** various whale myths and legends.**Procedure:**

- 1) Read some myths and legends about whales.
- 2) Students may then draw a picture based on their favourite story and explain why they liked it.

Level: 4-7**Materials:** various whale myths and legends.**Procedure:**

- 1) Students select different First Nations legends about whales to read in class.
- 2) The students then write their own legends about whales, complete with illustrations. A story board or other type of visual aid could be used.