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Fish Farmers' Collaboration

STUDYGUIDE

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# Inheritance

## A Fisherman's Story

ABOVE: BALAZS MEZAROS



## SYNOPSIS

In the year 2000, the Hungarian River Tisza was flooded with tons of cyanide from an Australian-Romanian gold mine. The poisonous chemical caused an environmental disaster, killing over 1200 tons of fish and devastating the river's ecosystem. Fishermen along the river, like Balazs Mezaros, struggle to survive. The Fishing Co-operative is losing profit and is on the verge of bankruptcy. In a turn of events, Balazs is elected the President of the Fishing Co-op and has the difficult task of leading the organization through the hardest times it has ever faced. In this hopelessness, Balazs travels to Australia to meet with the mining company responsible, to discuss compensation and present them with the human tragedy at hand. He must save his people and preserve a way of life.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

Suitable for Science and Technology at any level of secondary or tertiary education. Also for English, SOSE, Legal Studies, Justice Studies, International Law, Peace Studies, Economics, Future Studies, Media Studies.

## KEY WORDS AND TERMS

*Cyanide, pollution, disaster, ecosystem, ecological, impact, devastation, compensation, litigation, bankruptcy, responsibility, relationship, origins, mourn, access, quest, confront, reconciliation*

## THE FILM-MAKER

Peter Hegedus was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1976. His family moved to Australia when he was fourteen. He made his first award-winning docu-

mentary about his grandfather and, at twenty-four, *Inheritance, A fisherman's story* was his first feature length documentary and an international co-production. He formed his own company, Soul Vision Films Pty Ltd, in 2002.

## HIS MOTTO

Peter's company has a motto: 'To produce and direct films that provide insight into the human condition and essentially help to make the world a better place.'

## DISCUSSION

- Make a class list of the films most students have seen in the last six months. How many of these would fit Peter's company motto?

## ACTIVITY

- Choose a movie you have watched recently or that you can hire on video. What messages does this film give viewers and what sort of world does it depict?
- How does this documentary fit the motto? The following chart may help.

## HIS POINT OF VIEW

Peter says:



*As a filmmaker, I seem to pursue the idea that there is no such thing as 'good' and 'bad'. I think people make mistakes and can also be ignorant but very rarely can people be evil. So I tried to project this point of view in my film and I shall continue to do so in the films I make in the future.*

## DISCUSSION

- What does this comment reveal about the film-maker's personality and values?
- Do you agree with this view of the world?

## ACTIVITY

- Write your personal vision statement for the current year in up to 100 words. Place this in the centre of a sheet or a double notebook page and prepare a supporting collage of pictures, quotations from poems, songs and people you admire.

Encourage students to include family and community and to provide translations if they use languages other than English.

## FILM TECHNIQUES

Discuss the effectiveness of the following techniques and any others you

Film title	Country	Year	Insights into human condition	Helps to make the world a better place by...
<i>Inheritance: A fisherman's story</i>	Australia	2003		
Your choice, e.g. <i>Chicago</i> <i>Matrix Reloaded</i> <i>Whale Rider</i>				



ABOVE: BALAZS MEZAROS



identify.

- The conversational approach, with the film-maker as participant-observer
- The use of colour and black and white. What effect do these choices have on you as a viewer?
- Music. Does this music support the narrative? How?

#### Images

- What are the most striking images in this video for you?
- What other images of pollution or of environmental success stories have remained with you from news stories or other media?

#### ACTIVITIES

- Plan a publicity campaign for the fishermen to bring attention to their plight two years after the disaster.
- Pause the image of Balazs against the ocean. How does this symbolize his struggle?
- The stork is another powerful image and metaphor. Balazs was trying to preserve a stork in his freezer that was electrocuted when its wings touched two electric wires. At first he felt sorry for the stork, but then he decided to have the dead bird stuffed and presented to the local school for their science studies. This is a good example of turning a disaster into something positive. How can this example help others?

#### ANOTHER VIEWPOINT: THE COMPANY

Peter says,

*[I wanted] the audience to understand the human side of the mining company, to be able to identify with the notion of being an Australian, to restore the image*

*of Australia.*

#### DISCUSSION

- Discuss Peter's comment. Do you think he has succeeded? What impression do you have of 'the human side' of the company, Esmeralda Exploration?
- What conflicts are there between a mining company's commercial objectives and the need to protect the environment? How have attitudes to environmental protection changed over time?

A representative of Esmeralda said that the media 'crucified them'.

- Research the role of the media in reporting serious environmental issues. Is there any evidence that the media reports unfairly, or exaggerates, a problem?

#### TOPIC 1—THE DISASTER: THE FACTS

#### DISCUSSION

- Ask students to isolate the facts of the disaster from the documentary. Ask them to listen for the following: *time of the disaster, temperature, slurry, storage, changes.*

This excerpt from a press release may help. [http://www.bseanetwork.org/Issue2\\_2.html](http://www.bseanetwork.org/Issue2_2.html)

#### WWF – Hungary: Press Release, 15 February 2000

*The spill originated in Baia Mare, north-western Romania on 30 January after*



*a dam broke at a tailing lagoon at an Australian-Romanian owned gold mine. Around 100,000m<sup>3</sup> of toxic sludge contaminated with cyanides and heavy metals spilled into the Lapus and Somes (Hungarian: Szamo) rivers, and reached the Hungarian border several days later. It killed virtually all aquatic life in the upper Tisza river (Hungary). It now seems clear that despite the danger to people living on the rivers' banks and wildlife living in the river or depending on it, news of the spill was not immediately made public by the governments of either country.*

*The upper Tisza is an extremely diverse freshwater ecosystem. Of the twenty-nine species of protected fish in Hungary, nineteen of them can be found in this stretch of the river. So far more than 100 tonnes of dead fish have been collected from the river surface*



*but many more are believed to be lying on the river bottom. In addition to those species directly affected by the toxic spill, there is a secondary danger to all species that feed on anything living in the river, including birds, for example the white-tailed sea eagle.*

*This spill has, in practical terms, eradicated all life from a stretch of up to 400 km of the Tisza river,' WWF Hungary Conservation Director, Gyorgy Gado said, 'We won't know the real extent of the damage until an evaluation can be carried out in Spring, but we already know that the rehabilitation of the river will take decades ...*

#### ACTIVITIES

This film is based on the environmental problem caused by using cyanide to extract gold.

Research the reasons for using such a poisonous chemical for routine mineral

TOP RIGHT: FILMING. RIGHT: PRODUCER & DIRECTOR PETER HEGEDUS. ALL OTHER: BALAZS MEZAROS



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processing. Are there any alternatives? If so, why are they not used?

A good place to begin research is this site, which discusses the issues and offers links to other related sites: <http://www.icconsultants.co.uk/ircyl.html>

IRCYL stands for the Investigation of the Risk of Cyanide in Gold Leaching on health and environment in Central Asia and Central Europe.

- Why do we produce gold? What do we use it for? What alternatives are there?

Gold is regarded as so important to the economy that we are usually given the world price for gold on the evening news broadcast.

- Research the Australian gold industry. How much do we produce? How much is it worth? How many people are employed in the industry? Does local gold production have environmental risks like those depicted in the film?

## TOPIC 2—CONSEQUENCES FOR THE COMMUNITY

The fishing community in the film had its livelihood destroyed by the cyanide spill. This caused tensions within the fishing co-operative, as their ability to pay license fees also disappeared. Balazs finally travelled to Perth to ask the mining company for compensation.

### DISCUSSION

- Compare the response to the recent bushfire disaster in Australia with what has happened to these people. How do you explain the differences?
- Discuss the question of whether the fishers have a moral or a legal case for compensation. Research the grounds that would enable an Australian fishing community to seek compensation. Do any special problems arise from the fact that this case crosses national boundaries?
- Are all Australian fisheries sustainable, or are some vulnerable in the way the Tisza fishery was?
- The 2003 draft plan for the Great Barrier Reef proposed a large reduc-

tion in the area of ocean that could be fished or trawled for prawns. Research the effect of this decision on fishing communities along the Queensland coast.

- Are there other examples in modern Australia of communities being disrupted when they lose the natural resource on which they depend? Do our responses make a distinction between natural disasters and the consequences of human actions?

Balazs and Edit live without gas or electricity, as he cannot afford to pay his bills.

- How long would you be able to cope without electricity? How would it affect your life from the moment you woke up in the morning? Try for an hour to live without electricity, living your normal life. What effects does it have?
- Would Balazs be allowed to live this way in Australia? Why not?
- What communities do live without power and other services in Australia?

### ACTIVITIES

- Contact your local electricity, gas or water supplier to find out what it takes to have these services removed and reconnected.
- What social welfare support would be available to someone like Balazs in Australia?

## TOPIC 3—ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION AND MINING

The facts were summarized above. After the breach in the tailings dam, toxic material containing cyanide spilled into the river system. As it moved downstream, it killed virtually all life in the rivers, leading to the collapse of all the economic activities that depended on that aquatic life; most obviously fishing and tourism collapsed. Villages like Algyo were severely affected.

### ACTIVITIES

- Research an example of poor environmental management of mining and mineral processing in Australia. Possible examples include Queenstown's

lunar landscape, the King River in Tasmania, Rum Jungle uranium mine in the Northern Territory or nineteenth century gold mines in most States.

- Can you find any instances where lower environmental standards are still accepted because mining or mineral processing would be uneconomic if modern standards were to be applied?

[Teacher's note: Queensland legislation exempts the town of Mount Isa from national air quality guidelines because Mt Isa Mines Pty Ltd argued that the smelting of copper from its mine would be un-economical if they were required to meet standards for emission of sulphur dioxide.)

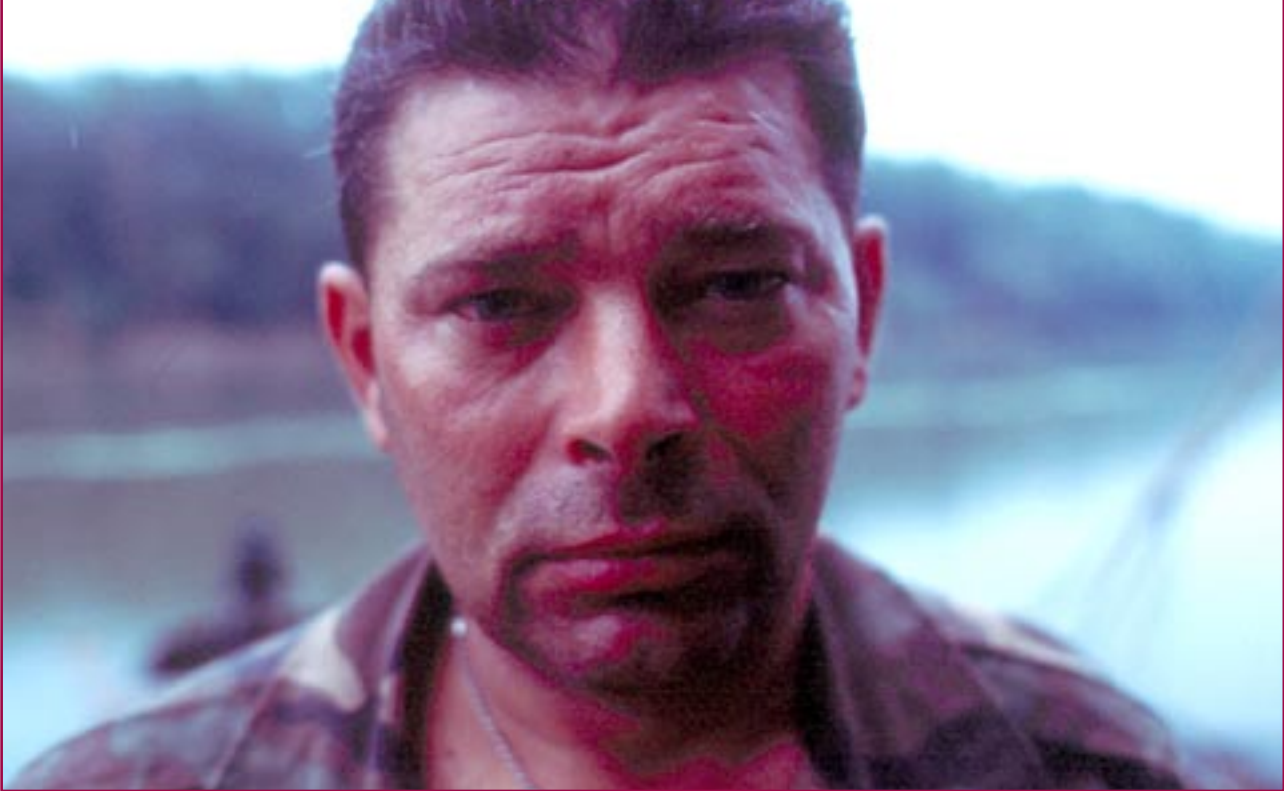
- Research modern environmental management by large local mineral companies, e.g. WMC Ltd or BHP Billiton. Report to the class on your findings.
- Organize a debate about whether Australian companies mining overseas should meet Australian standards or [often lower] local requirements. Discuss the reasons a poor country might be prepared to accept lower standards.
- Use this example to research the economic relationship between Australia and less wealthy countries in our region.

## RESPONSIBILITY AND MINING COMPANIES

Romania is one of poorest countries in Eastern Europe. In 1990, at the time of the Esmeralda project (an Australian-Romanian joint venture) there was no mining law. This was the only major mining project in Romania. International media had been refused entry to the site, but the film-maker was able to go there to make this documentary.

- 'It looks like a place on the moon', Balazs said. The slurry yields eighty-five gms of gold per tonne of ore. Is the price worth it? How much might it cost to restore the damage to the environment?

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in a press release at the time of the spill, made the following claims:



*The disasters in Romania, and two years previously in the Guadiamar river in Southern Spain, were predictable and preventable.*

*There have been too many disasters, spills, leakages and accidents involving toxic waste lagoons connected to mining.*

*The technology now exists to eliminate or substantially reduce most environmental impacts of mining.*

*The mining industry must prevent toxic spills from mining waste and build toxic waste dams that cannot flood or break.*

*Voluntary agreements of the type being discussed by the mining industry and the European Commission are not enough on their own and ... the industry should support a review of existing EU legislation.<sup>1</sup>*

Another pressure group has a critical report on its web site. An excerpt follows:

**Ecological Catastrophe?** - Cyanide Poisons Rivers <http://www.cyberalps.com/news/flashnews.html>

*100,000 cubic metres of water polluted with probably six times the legal maximum of cyanide escaped from a gold mine in Baia Mare Romania on*

*January 31 2000 and moved at 3km per hour down the Szamos and Tisza rivers through Hungary and Yugoslavia into the Danube down to the Black Sea. There are estimates of 80% of the fauna and flora being destroyed along hundreds of kilometres of the rivers. 83 tons of dead fish were taken from the Tisza and there were fears for the eagles which had fed on the fish in the river. The Hungarian press called this leak the greatest catastrophe since Chernobyl and there are estimates that the rivers will take up to 10 years to recover. Romania and the Australian owners of the gold mine have tried to minimize the damage and whilst it is true that in the Danube at least there is a heavy toxic content both from upstream and as a result of the massive NATO bombing of Serbia there seems little doubt that this leak will rank as a disaster of very major proportions.*

#### DISCUSSION

Governments have the job of regulating



industrial activities that pollute the environment, but environmental groups are often more effective at putting pressure on polluters. What kinds of pressure tactics can students identify?

#### ACTIVITIES

- Use the Internet or other resources to find and report on another environmental disaster, focusing on the causes and the actions taken to repair the damage or compensate victims. Some obvious examples include Minimata in Japan, Chernobyl in the Ukraine, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the chemical leak at Bhopal in India, radioactive pollution at Maralinga in South Australia, the 2003 oil spill in Spain.
- Choose a particular environmental disaster. Mark it on a world map and present the facts to the group. Could it have been prevented? How? What lessons have been learnt as a result of it?
- Watch the film *Erin Brockovich*, or *The Insider*. You may also be able to obtain access to an early Australian documentary about testing of nuclear weapons in South Australia called *Backs to the Blast*.
- Identify common problems faced by ordinary citizens when they are challenging large companies or other powerful organizations.
- Write a short review on your chosen

film for two different audiences; one for your student magazine and another as a radio script.

- o Students could work in pairs to prepare and present an interview about their chosen film.

## TOPIC 4—LIVING TWO CULTURES

### WHAT IS CULTURE?

Everyone has a culture and cultures are always changing.

- Discuss this comment. 'We are all different. We are all the same, We all depend on each other.' <sup>2</sup>

Like many Australians, the producer/director has access to two cultures, the Hungarian culture of his family and early life and the English-speaking culture of Australia where he grew up after his family migrated to Australia.

Here is a quote from Peter Hegedus

- '[It] was the perfect opportunity ...to continue understanding and contrasting the Australian and Hungarian in me.'

### DISCUSSION

- What do you think he means by this?
- Prepare a cultural map of the class, using a world map and coloured pins to show the multiple cultural heritages of the group.

Brainstorm what is positive, negative (if any) and interesting about having access to several cultures.

### ACTIVITY

- Research one of the countries of origin of your ancestors or your family, or a country that you might like to visit. Possible topics include: when your family came to Australia, and what was happening in that place at that time that may have led to the decision to leave.

### HUNGARY

For information about Hungary <http://hipcat.hungary.org/users/hipcat/> is a good site to begin your search. It contains links to maps, history and even Hungarian music on the Internet.

For some mouth-watering Hungarian recipes try this page: <http://homepage.interaccess.com/~june4/recipes.html>

You can choose from soups, main courses, dumplings, and sweets. Many of these are designed for life in a cold climate. *Paradicsomleves* is Tomato Soup. You might like to try making this one. The author of the recipes has a link so you can tell her what you think of her recipe. [This recipe uses bacon. Some students may need to change this meat.]

- 225 gm good bacon, sliced and cut in small pieces
- 1 large onion, minced
- 1 large can of crushed or pureed tomato [about 900 gm]
- 1 can of water
- 1/2 cup of celery, minced
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- a few peppercorns and salt to taste
- Saute bacon in a soup pot, and drain off bacon fat.
- Saute minced onion and celery with bacon bits in pot till transparent.
- Add the can of tomatoes and add one can of water.
- Add sugar, and peppercorns.
- Bring soup pot to low boil, and lower heat to simmer and let simmer about 45 min. to 1 hour.
- Soup can contain broad noodles, or rice. Precook these and add before serving.
- Serves 4 to 6. <http://homepage.interaccess.com/~june4/huntomatosoup.html>

### DISCUSSION

- What obvious and not so obvious problems would Balazs and Edit face in trying to cook some of these delicious recipes?

### ACTIVITY

Choose this or another recipe that appeals to you and make it at home. It may be possible to negotiate with the Home

Economics department to feature Hungarian cooking.

## TOPIC 5—STRESS AND FAMILY LIFE

### DISCUSSION

Relationships and the effects of stress on them are a recurring theme in this film. Analyse the effects over two years on the following relationships:

- Balazs and Edit
- Balazs and other fishermen
- Balazs and his mother

Are the men and women responding in different ways? How is Balazs' private life influenced by his public role as President of the Fishing Co-operative at this difficult time? What is Balazs' point of view? What is Edit's?

Balazs is writing a book about the incident and sees himself as part of an ongoing tradition.

- Can you think of books written by other people as a result of periods of severe stress or upheaval in their lives?

Study guide prepared by Patricia Kelly and Prof. Ian Lowe, Brisbane-based writers.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> River disaster preventable, WWF tells mining industry WWF press release, accessed 10 June 2003, <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~natsinas/news2000Feb.html#f163>
- <sup>2</sup> G. Badley, 'Developing Globally-Competent University Teachers', *Innovations in Education and Training International (IETI)*, 37(3), 2000, pp. 244-253.

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