REAL LIFE WATER RATS
Synopsis

Real Life Water Rats is a four-part series that follows an elite police enforcement team from Tasmania’s Marine and Rescue Division. Set against the beauty of Tasmania’s rugged coastline, Real Life Water Rats documents the work of a highly trained group of police officers as they search for missing sailors, scramble dive teams in raging seas, wage war against criminals and keep the peace between professional and recreational fishermen.

The Marine and Rescue Division is the only police group in Australia responsible for both search and rescue operations as well as fisheries enforcement. This unusual combination of tasks requires the team to employ a diverse range of skills and technologies, including helicopters, boats, underwater dive teams, land and sea based surveillance teams as well as a range of state services, including paramedics and hospitals.

Real Life Water Rats is an honest and engaging documentary that showcases modern police-work within a rich and varied environment. The members of the Marine and Rescue squads are as courageous as they are self-effacing. Their job involves risking their lives to save the lives of others, not always with a successful outcome. The good humour and camaraderie of the teams is an essential element to being focused on the job and enjoying it, even in the face of danger.

About this Study Guide

Key themes discussed in this Study Guide include policing, fisheries, trade, employment, and Australian lifestyle. The Study Guide includes questions and activities to be explored after watching each episode. The questions can be incorporated into classroom discussion or students can provide individual written responses. The activities in the Study Guide include a mixture of individual investigation, class discussion and small group work.

CURRICULUM LINKS > This film will be of interest to teachers and students from senior secondary school in the following subject areas: Geography, Social and Cultural Studies, Studies of Society and the Environment, Health and Human Development, and Media Studies.
Making the Film

**REAL Life Water Rats** had its beginnings in research that the producers did into Tasmania’s commercial fishing industry during the late 1990s. The industry is a highly diverse one, with all elements sharing the common denominator of the Marine Police. Further research showed that as the only police group in Australia with an interest in both search and rescue as well as fisheries enforcement, the Division would make an excellent documentary subject. Tasmania Police gave their full support to the idea, granting the producers unprecedented access to both their officers and operations.

The events captured in **Real Life Water Rats** were shot over a period of five months. Prior to this, producers carried out a number of months of pre-production and research. This allowed for a variety of key seasonal events to unfold, including the world-famous Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race in January and the opening of the scallop season in April. In addition, this long production period gave the producers the opportunity to become accustomed to the work of the Marine and Rescue Division and for members of the Division to become comfortable with the presence of a camera crew as they went about their duties. This level of familiarity between the production crew and the police officers is evident from the openness with which the officers discuss their feelings and their attitudes towards their work.

Technically speaking, the production posed many difficulties, including overcoming the challenges of filming in helicopters, boats, and in situations where the lives of both the police officers and production crew members were potentially at risk. Ideally, the crew operated as a team of three: director, camera operator and sound recordist. But in the smaller boats and in the helicopters there was only room for one crewmember, and, in these cases, either the director or the camera operator worked solo, assuming the duties of the other two. Regardless of the crew size, they lived with the police squads in cramped quarters at sea and successfully worked alongside them in situations that required a strong team approach.

The police officers themselves tended to downplay the dangers of the job. As a result, narration became an important tool to clarify the journey and make the viewers aware of what was at stake. To narrate the film, producers chose actor Steve Bisley. As a well-known Australian actor, known particularly for his role as one of the stars of the Nine Network’s **Water Rats** television drama series, it was felt that Bisley would enhance the production and increase its audience appeal.
DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

• Producers decided to make a documentary about the Marine and Rescue Division because of their varied work, and the fact that so little was known about them. Why are these factors important? What other factors are important in deciding to focus on this topic?
• Identify a subject in your local community that would provide material for a good documentary. Present your idea to the class. After the presentations have finished, vote as a class for the documentary you would most like to see. Real Life Water Rats could be subtitled 'A Day in the Life of Tasmania's Water Police.'
• Name three other documentaries you have seen or heard about. What elements do they share in common with Real Life Water Rats? Apart from their subject matter, what are their differences? Consider elements like narration and editing style, music and graphic design when answering this question.
• Producers began filming in summer because it provided a window of ‘good shooting weather.’ Research Tasmania's seasonal weather patterns. Why would filming have been an issue in other seasons?
• One of the film's Directors, Varcha Sidwell, writes of filming one rescue mission: 'We find ourselves bashing through ten metre seas and forty-five knot winds in the pitch black. Filming in these conditions is horrendous. The journey to reach the stricken yacht takes hours. Surfing waves in a twenty-three metre boat is terrifying, brutal and relentless ... I'm wedged into the door constantly being sick and drenched by the sea.' Discuss the difficulties of filming real-life rescue operations. What are some of the precautions a film crew must take before undertaking this kind of project? How might they prepare for the unexpected?
• Write a diary about a week as the Director of the film on board the Van Diemen. What would make the experience unique? Highlight the most and least enjoyable aspects of the job.
• How important is the narrator in a film such as this? Discuss different ways in which the producers could have told the story without using a narrator.
• Producers employed a well-known actor to narrate the film, Steve Bisley, despite the fact that this may have cost more than using a relatively unknown narrator. Do you think the presence of a higher profile 'name' as narrator adds anything significant to the production? Was it worth paying more than using somebody else?
• Identify differences in the portrayal of police officers in fictional films and television programs compared to the authentic police officers seen on Real Life Water Rats.
DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

• What is the significance of naming the police boat Van Diemen? Research the origins of this name.
• Research the history of the Sydney to Hobart yacht race. Why has it become such a significant fixture in Australia’s sporting calendar, especially considering it is a sport in which the majority of Australians do not participate?
• Would you be a crew-member on a yacht racing in the Sydney to Hobart? Conduct a class vote on who would like to participate in the race. Discuss the reasons why/why not.
• Write a newspaper article describing the rescue of the Skandia. Write the story of the rescue from the perspective of the police skipper, Leigh Stanley. Consider the particular decisions he made as skipper of the Van Diemen and the risks involved in the operation. Now write the story from the perspective of the skipper of Skandia considering the same set of issues. How are their responsibilities as skippers similar? What were the risks involved in the operation for each one? Discuss.
• The filmmaker did not know that the Skandia incident was going to occur before joining Leigh Stanley and his crew for their patrol. What focus do you think this episode would have taken if the Skandia incident had not occurred? Discuss the ways that documentary films are determined by chance occurrences. How do you think the filmmaker adapts to the stories available to him/her at the time of filming? What filmmaking tools can be used to structure the story as it unfolds?
• The film crew were on board the Van Diemen to film the operation. As a class, discuss the preparations the film crew would need to make for this episode.
• Identify the music used in the background of this episode. How would you describe it? Does it match the images and the narration? Identify a current Top Forty song that would provide a good backing track to this episode.

Episode 1: Ocean Rescue

Just after Christmas every year the Tasmanian Police patrols the eastern entrance to the Bass Strait on its flagship, Van Diemen. This patrol coincides with the arrival of the Sydney to Hobart fleet into Australia’s most treacherous stretch of ocean. The recent history of the Sydney to Hobart has seen a number of disasters and near disasters and this year was no exception. For the Real Life Water Rats, what begins as a routine patrol, checking seal colonies and amateur fishermen, quickly becomes a life and death race through ten metre seas to save the crew of the stricken maxi-yacht, Skandia. After rescuing all sixteen crewmembers, Skipper Leigh Stanley and his crew of four receive the highest police commendations for their work.
Episode 2: What We’re Trained For

The Real Life Water Rats train hard and often. They have to because they never know what’s coming next. This episode follows a number of life and death situations, where rescue teams save the lives of an ocean sailor, a bushwalker and a girl who has fallen off a cliff near Hobart.

This episode also investigates the ongoing training regime the squad needs to undertake to keep up with the pace of their challenging jobs. The squads explore some of their experiences on the job and describe how they have learned to cope with the variety of situations they encounter, including the sad reality being that not all rescue missions are successful.

• What emotional and physical attributes would a member of the Marine and Rescue Division need? Prepare a job advertisement with these attributes. What personality types would not be suited for a job within this Division? Why? Compare your ideas with your classmates.

• Design a recruitment poster for the Division to try to attract the talent best suited for this type of work. Consider what aspects of the work would be particularly appealing to the type of person you wish to attract and how to represent this pictorially.

• Invite a police officer from your local area into your class to describe the training she/he undergoes. Prepare to interview the officer about key aspects of the job.

• It can be argued that the cost of rescuing someone should be paid by those rescued. Conduct a debate within your class about this topic. One side should defend the position that the costs should be covered by tax dollars. The other side should argue for the costs to be covered by those rescued.

• Teamwork is an essential element of the success of the Real Life Water Rats. Identify scenes in this episode where police officers had to work as a team to be successful.
**DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES**

- The Van Diemen patrols for poachers and illegal fishing. Why are poaching and illegal fishing such serious offences in Australia? What do you think might occur if anti-poaching/illegal fishing laws were not in place?
- The squad combines search and rescue with enforcing fisheries law. What are the unique responsibilities related to search and rescue and how do they differ from enforcing fisheries law? Why do you think these tasks are the combined responsibilities of the Tasmanian Marine and Rescue Division?
- If Tasmania is the only state where the water police also enforce fisheries law, identify what happens in other states. Who looks after enforcing fisheries law there?
- Why do you think poachers who steal from other people’s craypots are known as ‘ratters’? What other Australian colloquialisms are used to describe people who steal from others, or for criminals in general?
- Identify on a map the locations described in this episode and the others in the *Real Life Water Rats* series.
- How would you describe the demeanour of the private citizens encountered by the police officers on patrol (both on land and water)? Would you describe them as welcoming and friendly, or wary and distrustful? Discuss your impressions with your classmates.

**Episode 3: Fishy Business**

**THIS** episode follows the *Real Life Water Rats* as they patrol the fisheries along Tasmania’s coastline. Constable Matt Thomas investigates fishermen illegally pulling other people’s craypots (or ‘rating’ them), as well as fish shops, fish processors, and deckhands. Matt also runs a covert operation to catch a couple of ‘pot raters’ red-handed. Feathers are ruffled as he confronts the two villains.

Meanwhile, the crew of the Van Diemen run an expedition to monitor the first day of the scallop season. This is the first time the scallop season has been open in ten years due to laws enacted to protect the declining scallop numbers. The police aim to educate the public about scallop quotas and the importance of a sustainable fishery.
**Episode 4: Guns and Abalone**

In this episode, the Van Dieman is on patrol in Tasmania’s wild South West waters. The crew find themselves in a wonderland of seal colonies and untouched waterways close to Australia’s most remote southern lighthouse. While in this area, they are on the lookout for illegal abalone divers. With its high value, abalone attracts over-fishing, so the crew of the Van Dieman are welcome friends to many fishing folk who want to see the fishery preserved as the cornerstone of their livelihoods.

Not everyone welcomes the patrolling Real Life Water Rats though. As the Van Dieman patrols the southern coastline, a surveillance squad gains intelligence of a poacher who is thought to be concealing illegal firearms. They set up a covert operation and begin a waiting game to catch the poacher and investigate the claims made against him. It is the fisherman’s worst nightmare when the Water Rats come calling with a search warrant. They discover a range of illegal items when they search both his boat and his home, from under-sized crayfish to ammunition and firearms.

**DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES**

- Skipper Leigh Stanley says, “I’m doing what I love to do, and I’m getting paid to do it!” What is it that inspires the Real Life Water Rats to do their job? What are some of the things they say they love most? What are some of the downsides?
- Describe some of the difficulties in taking a documentary crew along on a covert operation. Identify some of the legal, logistical and ethical considerations that would have to be taken into account.
- Why is there a need for marine reserves in Tasmania? Identify marine reserves in your own state. What wildlife have they been set up to protect?
- Write a newspaper story describing the covert operation and its results. While writing the story, identify what is meant by the term ‘defamation of character.’ How does this affect the way you write your story?
- Rewrite the story of the covert operation as if it were going to be made into a Hollywood blockbuster film. What are the differences between real life and fiction?
- Increasingly, the media covers real-life stories that put potentially innocent people on trial. What are your views on ‘trial by media’ – do you think they should be allowed to reveal the identity of a person who has not yet been convicted?
- As well as overfishing, identify other man-made factors that could have an effect on Tasmania’s marine life.
References

About the film: www.roarfilm.com.au


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