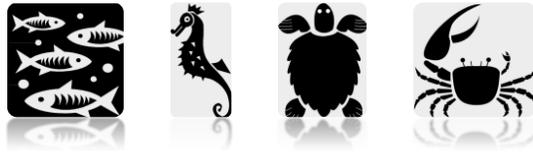


FISH TANK



A FABLE FOR OUR TIMES

DISCUSSION GUIDE

BY
SCOTT BISCHKE

* A MountainWorks Press Book *

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GOOD CAMEL, GOOD LIFE
Finding Enlightenment
One Drop of Sweat at a Time
MountainWorks Press 2010

CROSSING DIVIDES
A Couples' Story of Cancer, Hope, and
Hiking Montana's Continental Divide
American Cancer Society 2002

TWO WHEELS AROUND NEW ZEALAND
A Bicycle Journey on Friendly Roads
Pruett Publishing hardback 1992; Ecopress paperback 1996



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An Overview of the Discussion Guide

This discussion guide begins with a chapter-by-chapter set of questions exploring the environmental, ecological, political, and ethical questions that arise during the course of FISH TANK. In general, questions associated with each chapter can be explored sequentially while reading the book without spoiling the story.

Following the chapter-by-chapter discussion questions are multiple sets of topical questions—science, public policy, morality and ethics, allegorical, and holistic. Readers and discussion leaders are cautioned that these questions *do* include story spoiling information. Thus we recommend using the second set of questions after reading groups have completed the book.

The questions posed in this guide purposely cross many boundaries and topics. The author recommends that each reading group pick and choose from the question herein and delve into a subset of those questions, depending on the group's interests.

A consideration for readers discussing FISH TANK: The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines allegory as follows—

al·le·go·ry (noun \ 'a-lə-,gôr-ē\): (1) the expression by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths or generalizations about human existence; (2) a symbolic representation

To the author, the beauty of an allegory is that no “correct” interpretation exists. In essence, the writer creates the situation and characters and throws them out to the world for the world to interpret. While the author may have had many ideas in mind for the who, what, where, etc. he or she was seeking to represent, those ideas don't necessarily matter to the readers' enjoyment or understanding of the work.

The allegory, above all writing forms, demands reader interpretation. So rest assured, there are no right or wrong answers for the questions in the discussion guide that follows. The only requirements, if the author has his way, is that the reader have a willingness to think critically, to engage in meaningful discussion, and to question their own beliefs and try to understand those of others. If the reader is willing to take on these tasks, then it is just possible that FISH TANK could provide a pathway to education, and even to change.

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS & POLITICAL ISSUES BY CHAPTER

Chapter 1

1. In an allegorical sense, what roles do you see Professor Brown, Augustus, and the fish in the aquarium playing? Are the roles you see for these characters the same throughout the book, or do they vary depending on the situation the creatures find themselves in?
2. Do you find anything odd about Professor Brown feeling “lucky” that the endangered seahorse he has studied for a lifetime is being threatened?
3. Explain these three concepts: ecosystems, island biogeography, and the Gaia principle. Does the setting created for the fish bring these concepts into play? If so, how and if not, why not?
4. How does Professor see his role and relationship with the creatures of the aquarium? What does that role represent to you? Do you see any parallels in humanity (real or mythology) with the Professor departing and leaving his creatures in the hands of Augustus (and ultimately in their own hands)?

Chapter 2

1. What does the large ledge in the cave wall, and the creatures’ meetings there, represent to you?
2. Who might Augustus represent when the crabs label him “AgainstUs”? And what about the crabs—who might they represent?
3. Can you name any current day parallels to the situation where Hansom the goatfish defends Augustus for being of some use for feeding the creatures? And what might Augustus’s pay represent?
4. Do you see parallels with any political doctrine when the crabs strongly declare that the creatures can’t depend on Augustus, indeed that they can only rely on themselves?

Chapter 3

1. What motivates Augustus to build the extended food hopper? What parallels do you see in today’s society?
2. What might the fish all lined up and staring at Augustus through the aquarium glass represent? And what about his reaction when he sees the fish?

Chapter 4

1. When Hansom the goatfish reports his concerns about a future food shortage, how do the creatures react? Why? Can you think of any parallels to this situation in our world today? Describe.
2. Rumors spread through the aquarium about the food shortage. Why do you think it is so difficult to translate scientific findings into publically accepted truths—in the aquarium, in today’s world?
3. How effective are Hansom’s predictive models in swaying the conversation about the possibility of an impending shortage? What limits and strengthens their effectiveness? What is the importance of Hansom’s continued effort to improve the models?
4. What occurrence (or lack thereof) drives the creatures of the aquarium to listen to Hansom? Why does this occurrence have such great impact?
5. What tactics do the crabs use to convince the creatures that all is OK? How do they control the message that they want to put forward?

Chapter 5

1. What role do Tommy, Jessie, Ally, and Altair take on when they begin to meet? Why are their initial efforts to get the other creatures to eat less failures?
2. How do the crabs control the discussion in the aquarium—do they address the issue at hand directly or do something else? How does the name calling (“stargazers!”) impact the success of the four activists at spreading their message?
3. What traits are the two fish displaying when (a) Hansom shrugs his shoulder as if to say the numbers don’t lie, then later rolls his eyes in pity and disdain, and (b) when Dusty says he can’t be bothered to be involved? What type of people display those traits, and why?
4. Why is it important that the goby mother-to-be (and others) continually worry about their young ones? Does that mimic anything happening in society in past years or today?
5. When the crabs deny the food shortage they call Sanger forward. What role does Sanger play in the discussion? How does he help the crabs sway the creatures’ beliefs?
6. What power lies in the chant of “ENDLESS FOOD!” and how do the crabs exploit that power?

Chapter 6

1. Why did the creatures tend to believe the message provided to them by Sanger, the crabs, and those of a similar mind more than by Doc Hansom? What suggestions do you have that might have helped Hansom better get his message across?
2. What role did Tommie, Jessie, Altair, and Ally play following Hansom’s discovery/revelation about removing refraction from the discussion and confusion? Why were their efforts important? Can you name groups and issues in today’s society that might parallel these efforts?
3. Even when the majority of creatures agreed with Hansom that they were in peril from an imminent food shortage, some creatures continued to deny that shortage. Why did they do so?
4. Unlike any of the other creatures, the crabs were able to move freely about, leading to their ability to secretly consume the food supply. What parallels in past or modern societies do you see with this situation?
5. What political thought process do you see reflected in the crab’s claim that “AgainstUs” only wants money for nothing in return?
6. Sarin claims that the creatures only need to believe in Professor Brown. Does such reasoning parallel political or social thought today? Examples?
7. Hansom declares the need to cut back on rations by 50% every single day. If the creatures had acted sooner, would the rationing need been so severe? What stopped them from acting sooner? Are there any resource situations and decisions being made today that parallel this situation?
8. Why were the crabs in the end in favor of the rationing? Did they ration their own food intake or worry for the other creatures or the creatures’ progeny? Why or why not—what drove the crabs’ behavior?

Chapter 7

1. Do you see any similarities between the difficult times of food rationing and difficult economic times in the real world? If so, explain.
2. What economic philosophy is put forth in the discussion of the creatures’ sharing (or lack thereof) of their limited food supply?

3. What purpose does Sarin's declaration of "...we are miserable, just like all of you" serve? How do you think Tommy likely received Sarin's proclamation?
4. The crabs' took more than their share both in good times and in bad. Can you name any similar situations in the real world? If so, what entity is taking more than their fair share and of what commodity? Is it always wrong for one group to take more than its fair share? If not, give some situations where unequal distribution of limited resources is acceptable (even preferable?).
5. Some fish started talking about eating their neighbors, a situation certain to cause chaos. Can you name any present or past situations where society similarly verged on, or fell into, chaos?
6. Hansom proposes cultivating algae in a move that illustrates necessity being the mother of invention. Do the creatures take immediately to the idea? What makes it hard for the creatures and, by extension, mankind to embrace change?
7. When Altair say that Professor Brown "...would expect us to do what we have to until he gets back", what principle(s) is the seahorse putting forth?
8. What power did the crabs gain by coining the phrase "MORE AND BETTER" food? Why is such a phrase so powerful? Can you think of catch phrases that drove social or political change in past or present societies?

Chapter 8

1. Sarin, Roop, and Sanger get Doc Hansom to help them selectively use science to make a point they want Push and Dusty to accept. Can you name current situations that seem to be driven by selective use of science? Is science employed selectively more or less powerful than providing a complete picture? Explain.
2. Both Sanger and Roop push Hansom to wrap up the discussion on Spirulina with a conclusive statement that meets their goals. Does science always operate in black and white answers? Why do the creatures, like past and present societies, seem to fear living in a world of gray areas? Can you name examples of this phenomenon?
3. Hansom seems puzzled at the rapid wrap up of the Spirulina discussion. Are scientists generally considered good debaters and creators of public policy? Why or why not (include examples)?

Chapter 9

1. As times become prosperous, how do the creatures react? Do they look after each other, or mostly focus on their own needs?
2. What is the single, paramount goal driving the crabs' behavior? Do they show any propensity toward conservation of resources? Why or why not?
3. When Flecky screams "WE WILL ALL DIE!" he plays on the fear of the creatures. Can you name some instances where fear was, at least in some people's minds, employed in politics in past or recent years?
4. What desired end do the crabs seek in their proclamation that the Spirulina will soon crash? What pseudo-science do they employ to support their claims? How do they introduce their ideas to the creatures? Why aren't the creatures more reticent to accept the claims? Why doesn't Hansom provide more input?
5. What principle of law is reflected in the crabs' appropriation of Dusty's living space?
6. The shrimp rally to the chant of "More food, better food!" Why are they so willing to take on the crabs' wishes? What motivates the shrimp?

Chapter 10

1. Why did the overall growth of bubble algae top that of Spirulina? Who benefited most? Can you see parallels with any events in modern society?
2. Considering modern day society, how might one interpret the crabs waxing poetically about “the good days” after Augustus filled the food drum?
3. Roop tells white lies to Hansom about the creatures’ complaining about their food supply. Have white lies become part of our modern political system? If so, can you provide examples?
4. Hansom shows hubris when Sarin compliments him to the detriment of Sarin. Do scientists have a propensity to hubris and/or competitiveness? Whether you respond yes or no, explain why you think that is so.
5. When Hansom repeatedly says he needs to get back to his studies, he seems semi-oblivious to the issues of public policy developing all around him. Does such a scenario mimic scientists today? If so, give examples.
6. The crabs employ information about the aquarium thermostat that is unknown by all but themselves. Can you name situations today where a group has withheld critical information as a means to benefit itself alone? What happened when the information hiding was revealed to the public? Do you suspect information hiding going on today—if so, in what situation?
7. Sarin and Roop focus on only what is good for crabs and seem to have no sympathy for the other creatures when Big Moe hesitates. Can you name similar situations that happen today?
8. Sarin and Roop declare that all the creatures “are only looking out for themselves”. Is this true in society today? If so, give examples of self preservation chosen from across the political spectrum.

Chapter 11

1. Big Moe turns the temperature up just a notch each night. Is there a parallel in today’s world? If so, what is the cause represented by Big Moe’s action?
2. The creatures initially reap the bounty of increased crop yields, just like the crabs. Is the system sustainable? While they are enjoying the bounty, is it fair that they don’t know what is providing that bounty? If they knew, do you think all or some of them would have protested? If so, who and why?
3. When the creatures first note that it seems hotter, what is their initial reaction? Why? What is Hansom’s reaction to Tommy’s question about if he thinks it feels hotter?
4. What tangible evidence do the creatures soon gain about the increasing temperature? How do Sarin and Roop diffuse their concerns? What parallels does this scenario have in modern society?
5. What role does Sanger play in the crabs’ denial of the temperature increase? What is the impact of the confusion he creates? What seems to motivate Sanger?
6. What role does the role for continued study play in the deniers plan? When Push and Hammy affirm Sarin’s call for more study, why don’t the creatures who disagree speak up? What are the ramifications of staying quiet in a public forum when group decisions are being made?
7. Why is Hansom less concerned than the others about the increasing temperatures? Can you think of parallels in today’s world where scientists (or others) ignore one issue to concentrate on another? Why do they do this?

Chapter 12

1. Name calling, such as Push and Hammy calling the seahorses “alarmist nags”, is a form of bullying. Can you describe bullying behavior you have witnessed or been a part of? Do you think bullying is only an issue with adolescents? If not, can you detail any bullying behaviors in adults?
2. Tommy declares a concern that even though the temperature increase is apparent to all, that it is beyond him “to figure out how we can get the others to understand that we are in real peril.” What situations exist today that have a similar dynamic? Why is it so hard to communicate peril and stimulate action to stave off that peril? Why do we tend to be disinclined to listen to troubling events that could impact us? Is the size of the precipitous event or our perceived ability to control that event complicit in our reaction to peril? Explain.
3. Hansom has trouble describing the dissolution of the caulking. Why do scientists, as a generality, have such difficulties communicating with the public?
4. Even with the revelation from Hansom that the caulking was dissolving, the creatures gave little response to Tommy and Jessie. Why do you think that was? What seemed to be the other creatures’ reaction? Can you think of ways to better engage the public; what might Tommy and Jessie tried?
5. What motivated (a) Tommy and Jessie to keep on even in the face of apathy, and (b) the crabs and their cronies to continue to deny increasing temperatures?
6. What is the importance of Gabe’s outburst? Why did it take so long for him to step forward? What would have happened if he had not come forward when he did?
7. Sarin asks the creatures to put their faith in Professor Brown. If the creatures had chosen that path, who would have benefited and how? By not choosing that path, what benefit did the creatures gain? What event(s) finally caused the creatures to act?

Chapter 13

1. What remarkable event finally caused the creatures of the aquarium to realize that they were in peril? In our own world, what event(s) might cause a similar realization? Has the event(s) already happened? If not, can you predict when it will?
2. What action do the creatures take to stem the leaking seal? In general, do you think prevention before a big problem is better than action after the fact? Why or why not? What are the advantages or disadvantages to both approaches? In the end, does the creatures’ attempt at mitigation of the problem appear to have worked?

Chapter 14

1. What changes Big Moe’s mind; why after weeks of turning up the thermostat does he stop? What quality(ies) does he display that Sarin and Roop seem incapable of? Do you know people or entities that have the same characteristics as Sarin and Roop? Why do you think they display such characteristics?
2. Why did Big Moe feel relief at finally telling Tommy about the crabs’ plan? Were you surprised by Tommy’s reaction? Why or why not?
3. How do the seahorses, Jessie, and Hansom react to Big Moe revealing the crabs’ secret? How would you have reacted? Have we had a similar revelation in past or present societies? Describe.

Chapter 15

1. When Roop screams, “You were all better off, too!” was he correct? How did the creatures benefit from the warmer temperatures? Do the creatures accept the culpability that Roop places upon

them? Would they have spoken up if they knew that the temperature-induced growth of their food supply would lead to a potentially disastrous end?

2. Do we have any parallels to this situation in our society? Do people or entities have the right to withhold information from us? If yes, who decides where the line is drawn about what the public has a right to know and what is better withheld from them?
3. What does Augustus's return symbolize to you?

Chapter 16

1. Is Augustus more or less self serving than the crabs, the creatures of the aquarium, Professor Brown? Are there any characters in the story that are working for the good of all? If so, who and what motivates that character(s)?
2. Augustus remains blissfully ignorant to the crisis unfolding in the aquarium. He also takes pride in collecting money for doing effectively no work. Does Augustus's behavior parallel anything happening in society today? Are there any political philosophies that would look at Augustus's actions (or lack thereof) and say, "No surprise, exactly what I would expect." If so, which ones and why?

Chapter 17

1. As a stream of water becomes visible on the outside of the aquarium, the creatures redouble their efforts to stop the crack from getting any larger. Even the shrimp join in. What motivates the shrimp to change alliances and what do you think was going through their mind at this point? Do you think they are upset with the crabs?

Chapter 18

1. Hansom and Sanger join together to survey the aquarium's falling water level. After being such opponents throughout the story, what has changed? Can you think of similar situations in your own life, or in our society, when foes have joined forces?
2. Were you surprised when Sanger (a) allowed Hansom the stage to address the creatures, and (b) contradicted Sarin? Why or why not?
3. In the face of ultimate crisis, Sarin once again says that Professor Brown will save the creatures. Do you think Sarin believes the claim? In your opinion, who or what does Professor Brown represent with respect to the creatures?
4. When Hansom says that his and Sanger's measurements have crossed a critical threshold, what does he mean? How does this threshold relate to the idea of a tipping point? What does Hansom mean when he says, "It may be that it is already too late"?
5. As disaster looms, Flecky returns to hide in the anemone and Sarin and Roop climb out of the aquarium. What do these two reactions to the crisis symbolize to you?

Chapter 19

1. Describe how what happens matches Hansom and Sanger's contention that it might already be too late?
2. At first water rushes out of the aquarium, and then the glass wall fails catastrophically. Can you think of parallels that have happened, or might happen, in our social, political, or ecological systems? Describe.

Chapter 20

1. Augustus hints to Professor Brown that a bonus might be in order for all his hard work over the year. Does such an outrageous demand (though the professor can't yet know it is outrageous) mimic anything happening in our society today? Explain.
2. How does Professor Brown react when he sees that his aquarium has been destroyed? Be explicit and explain the rationale for his feelings.
3. What might be represented by the fact that so many of the creatures (wrasses, gobies, angelfish, etc) appear dead, while the instigators of the calamity, the crabs, were simply able to climb out of the aquarium and survive to live another day? What might be represented by the two crabs, upon their release to a new environment, teaming up to chase off another crab?
4. What is the significance of the seahorses and the turtle surviving?
5. What do you think happened to Hansom the goatfish and Tommy Tang?
6. What do you think Professor Brown said to Jessie the Turtle before depositing her in the sea?

SCIENCE QUESTIONS

Ridley turtles

1. Where do Ridley turtles live?
2. What size do Ridley turtles grow to?
3. Is it reasonable to believe that Jessie would have still been a small turtle at the end of one year?
4. Would Jessie have survived being let go in the Pacific Ocean off of the Oregon Coast? What dangers would she have faced?

Nitrogen and fertilizing the aquarium

1. What is the chemical makeup of fish excrement?
2. What parallels are there in agriculture to the idea that the fish needed nitrogen to fertilize their crops? Can you name three naturally occurring fertilizers?
3. Is the crab's contention that the creatures of the aquarium let the food fall to the bottom of the aquarium to help fertilize the algae reasonable?
4. What about the sea water always coming into and exiting the tank? Would that have brought in or removed any food or nutrients? What kind?

Creature Biology

1. How do crabs grow? Is it reasonable to believe that while the other creatures were getting skinnier that the crabs looked the same? What if the crabs had not been sneaking food—would they still look the same?
2. What highly unique biological characteristics do wrasses have?
3. The goby-mother-to-be is frequently mentioned. How do gobies get pregnant and how do they give birth (e.g., live birth, eggs, something else)?

Ecological Questions

1. What similarities do you see in today's world with the food shortage crisis faced by the creatures? What differences? Do those differences make you hopeful or concerned?
2. What similarities do you see in today's world with the rising temperature issue faced by the creatures? What differences? Do those differences make you hopeful or concerned?

3. Ecology is the study living organisms and their relations to each other and their natural environment; it is about connections. What connections can you think of between any or all of the creatures of the aquarium with each other or their surroundings?

PUBLIC POLICY QUESTIONS

1. What parallels in everyday life do you see in the crabs agreeing with cutting food rations by half for the other creatures, then secretly climbing out of the aquarium themselves and eating their fill?
2. What type of ingenuity did the creatures of the aquarium exhibit? When?
3. Did the creatures accept or deny the tenets of science? How were their interactions with those who seemed solidly grounded in science? Did they respect Hansom the goatfish and Sanger the squirrelish with equally? Why or why not?
4. Why did Hansom the goatfish struggle to convince the creatures that Sanger the squirrelish was wrong regarding light refraction (Ch6)? Was the fact that Hansom was right enough to convince the others? How might he have been more successful in presenting his data? Did he have any traits that made his communication efforts less successful? Can you think of parallels in scientific communication occurring today?
5. Can you name an example when the creatures acted at cross purposes? When they collaborated? What differed in those situations?
6. Which creatures seemed most intent on their own interests? Which ones seemed more focused on the good of all creatures? Why do you think that they looked at the world so differently?
7. Several of the creatures had shared goals—can you name some and what their goal seemed to be? How did they work to accomplish their agenda? If success is defined as achieving your main goal, who was the most successful? Who benefited from that success? Who lost? What would have happened if others had instead achieved their goal instead?
8. Why do the creatures deny that there is a food shortage? Why do some of the creatures deny that the temperature is increasing? What does the denial gain them? What would they lose if they admitted that there was a problem? Would there be any benefit to the deniers if they changed their mind? If so, when and to whom would that benefit accrue?
9. Which issue—the food shortage or the warming temperatures—was it easier for the creatures to solve? Which issue did they seem more inclined to work together on? In both cases, why?
10. What's more important, working toward solutions that help everyone, or working to better yourself and assuming everyone else will do the same thing, as well? Which is a better approach for creatures living in the same confined space? Which is better for the environment they live in?

MORALITY AND ETHICS QUESTIONS

Character motivation

1. What was the crab's motivation in general? More specifically, what motivated them when they told the creatures of the aquarium to let the food fall to the bottom of the aquarium to fertilize the algae?
2. What parallels in everyday life do you see between the shrimp supporting the positions of the crabs, as well as doing their work (e.g., tending the bubble algae, which only the crabs ate)? What did the shrimp gain from these interactions—what motivated them to this behavior?

3. What motivated Flecky the Clownfish, Sanger the squirrelfish, Push the Puffer, Hammy the Parrotfish, either collectively or individually, to support the crabs?
4. What drove Big Moe's change of heart? What was it in his personality that led to that change? As he was making his decision to tell the others what the crabs had done, what do you think his thoughts were (Ch13)? Do you think it was hard for him to tell the others? Was there a sense of relief? What happened when he talked with Sarin and Roop?
5. Do you think Sarin or Roop, like Big Moe, ever had a change of heart, even late in the story? Why or why not?
6. Are there any similarities in the behavior of the crabs and Augustus?
7. Was it ethical for Augustus to leave the creatures when he said he would drop in twice a week?
8. Was it ethical for the Professor to keep fish in an aquarium? Was it selfish?

ALLEGORY QUESTIONS

Character and environs representation

1. Who or what does each of the characters in FISH TANK represent to you? Why—what actions or personality traits do they have, or what did they say to support your contention?

Ally : seahorse
 Altair : seahorse
 Augustus : handyman
 Big Moe : crab (big claw)
 Dolly : damselfish
 Dusty : flounder
 Flecky : clownfish
 Gabe : angelfish
 Hammy : parrotfish
 Hansom : goatfish
 Jessie : turtle
 Push : puffer fish
 Professor Brown : owner
 Roop : crab
 Sanger : squirrelfish
 Sarin : crab
 Tommy : tang
 Zuriela : angelfish

2. Who or what do the gobies, wrasses, and shrimp represent to you? Why? What statements do they make or actions do they take that make you feel that way?
3. What does the aquarium represent to you? The ocean? Why?

Literary questions

1. What is an allegory and what characteristics make the book fit into that category? Can you name three other allegories?
2. What makes the book a fable? Do you think that parable would have been a better descriptor, or perhaps fairy tale? What do each of those names mean?
3. Describe the characteristics of a tragedy? Do aspects of FISH TANK match those characteristics; could it be considered a tragedy? If yes, who or what is the tragic hero and what is his/her/its tragic flaw?

QUESTIONS FOR OUR TIMES**Lessons learned**

1. For you what are the book's main lessons? Can you name your top three?
2. What does it mean to you that the crabs lived on?
3. Who will be our society's sea horses? Explain.

