

Pirate With A Cause

Paul Watson's Crusade To Protect Marine Wildlife

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While living in Australia in 2010, I heard a good deal about the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society — a group of marine-wildlife activists who were going up against Japanese whaling ships in the Antarctic seas (www.seashepherd.org). They made the news night after night, and the U.S. cable-television channel Animal Planet was filming a series called *Whale Wars* about the group's activities. The wind-whipped people on my TV screen looked cold, strong, and resolute as they deliberately went in harm's way to save whales. I'd sit on the couch eating dinner and cheer them on, wondering if I could ever be so brave.

Sea Shepherd's founder, Paul Watson, believes in taking direct action to save marine wildlife — very direct. With more than two hundred sea voyages undertaken since 1977, the group claims to have saved many thousands of whales, seals, and other sea creatures. In some cases Sea Shepherd has shut down a country's entire whaling operation. Its small fleet travels the globe with limited funding, no weapons, and no naval or coast-guard protection to stop illegal whaling and fishing. Watson has become notorious for confrontations that result in destruction of property, but he maintains that he is upholding

international law, not violating it. His detractors have said that he has no authority on the seas and denounced him as a "pirate." Sea Shepherd has embraced the label in its fundraising, using a Jolly Roger-style logo and selling T-shirts and hoodies that list the names of the whaling ships it has sunk or put out of commission.

Watson was born in Toronto, Canada, in 1950 and spent most of his childhood in the fishing town of Saint Andrews in New Brunswick. At the age of nine he began removing beaver leg traps from the woods to foil hunters. At eighteen he joined the Canadian Coast Guard and a year later began traveling the world on board merchant ships. After returning, he helped organize a protest against U.S. underground nuclear testing at Amchitka Island in southern Alaska. He was a member of the Don't Make a Wave Committee and a crewman on board the committee's vessel the *Greenpeace Too*, which traveled to Amchitka in a failed attempt to disrupt the tests. A year later the committee renamed itself the *Greenpeace Foundation*, and Watson was the eighth official member.

Watson took part in Greenpeace's efforts to oppose whaling and was first officer on board the *Greenpeace V* when it



Paul Watson, with the Japanese whaling vessel Nisshin Maru in the background.

took on the Soviet whaling fleet in 1976. After that he and fellow Greenpeace member David Garrick organized a campaign against seal hunting in Canada, during which Watson chained himself to a pile of seal pelts. The seal hunters lifted the pelts into the ship anyway, and Watson was slammed against the hull and dunked in the frigid water until he lost consciousness. When other members of Greenpeace felt Watson was going too far, he left in 1977 to found the Earth Force Society, which soon changed its name to Sea Shepherd.

Watson claims that Sea Shepherd is the only organization attempting to enforce the international moratorium on whaling that has been in place since 1986. (The International Whaling Commission [IWC], which declared the ban, does not have the resources to enforce it.) Sea Shepherd also opposes the illegal hunting of sharks for their fins, which are considered a delicacy in China, and such widely banned fishing practices as bottom trawling, in which nets are dragged along the ocean floor, destroying habitat and killing many animals that are not consumed by humans.

Watson cofounded Friends of the Wolf to stop wolf hunting in British Columbia, ran for office in the Canadian parlia-

ment on the Green Party ticket, and served for three years on the national board of the Sierra Club. He has published six books, including *Earthforce!*, *Ocean Warrior*, and *Seal Wars*, and was named by Time as one of its environmental heroes of the twentieth century. When not actively involved in an ocean campaign with Sea Shepherd, he makes public-speaking appearances to raise awareness of and funding for his cause.

The Sea Shepherd campaign that brought Watson to my attention was called Operation Waltzing Matilda and was aimed at preventing Japanese whaling ships — which the Japanese government calls “research vessels” — from killing endangered whales in the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary, an area designated for conservation by the IWC in 1994. As well as using two large ships to hamper the movements of the main whaling vessels, Sea Shepherd also deployed the fast, small *Ady Gil* to stop the harpoon boats. The *Ady Gil* was used for only one day before it was rammed by the Japanese ship *Shōnan Maru 2*. No lives were lost, but the *Ady Gil*, named for the U.S. businessman who had donated the funds for its purchase, was unsalvageable; it sank. Nevertheless Sea Shepherd reports that Operation Waltzing Matilda stopped the Japanese whalers for at least three

weeks, preventing the deaths of hundreds of whales and costing the Japanese whaling industry tens of millions of dollars.

In the most recent whaling season Sea Shepherd was able to obstruct the Japanese whalers even further. After taking less than 10 percent of its expected catch, the entire fleet was recalled by the Japanese government, ending the hunt for that year and possibly for the foreseeable future.

I spoke to Watson in Australia when he was between campaigns. In person he is audacious and imposing. A great storyteller, he projects bold confidence and a low tolerance for manners and diplomacy. Though some critics might accuse him of self-mythologizing, none questions his courage and ferocious commitment to protecting marine life.

Kendall: What's the primary goal of Sea Shepherd?

Watson: I set it up to be an antipoaching organization. We are not a protest group. What we do is intervene against illegal activities. Whenever a vessel or a person is in violation of an international conservation regulation, treaty, or law, we step in.

Kendall: How do you stop whalers from killing whales?

Watson: We block the harpoon boats' access to the factory ship. If you kill a whale, you have to process the body within twelve hours. Otherwise the meat is no good. We make it impossible for them to do that by staying right on the tail of the whaling ship. Harpoon boats have tried to push in between us and the whaling ship, but I've always stood my ground, even when it caused a collision.

Kendall: How did you become involved in this work?

Watson: In June 1975 I was part of the first Greenpeace campaign to protect whales. [Greenpeace cofounder] Robert Hunter and I had come up with the idea to get in small, mobile boats and put ourselves between the whales and the harpooners, so they couldn't harpoon the whales.

We tracked down a Russian whaling ship that was chasing eight sperm whales about six miles off Cape Mendocino, California. We immediately got in front so that every time the harpooner tried to get a shot, we would block his aim. This worked until the captain came down the catwalk of the whaling vessel and screamed into the ear of the harpooner. Then he looked at us, smiled, and slid his finger across his throat.

A few minutes later the harpoon flew over our bow and just missed our boat. It rammed into the back of one of the female whales in the pod in front of us. She screamed, and it sounded like a woman screaming. It was really quite shocking. Then she rolled over on her side in a fountain of blood, dying.

Suddenly the largest whale in the pod disappeared. He swam straight down, right underneath us, and back up so fast that he came out of the water and threw his full body weight onto the harpoon vessel, to protect his pod. They got another harpoon and shot him in the head at point-blank range. He fell back into the water and was rolling in agony on the sur-

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face. Then he dove in a trail of bloody bubbles and came up again, fast. He lifted out of the water at such an angle that he was about to fall straight down on top of us and crush us.

As his head rose up out of the water, I looked into his eye, which was the size of my fist, and what I saw there changed my life: I saw understanding. I think the whale understood what we were trying to do, because, with great effort, he pulled himself back so that he would not fall on top of us. He slid slowly backward, and his eye disappeared beneath the surface, and he died. He could have taken our lives but chose not to.

I thought about how we'd been waging this war of extinction on the whales for centuries, for all sorts of ridiculous things — oil and umbrellas and skirt hoops. The Russians were using whale oil for high-heat-resistant machine lubricant on intercontinental ballistic missiles. I thought: *Here we are destroying this beautiful, intelligent, complex creature for the purpose of making a weapon designed for the annihilation of human beings.*

That very day I stopped being concerned about working for humanity. My clients are now whales and sharks and seals and other creatures that live in the sea. I don't give a damn what people have to say about that, because I don't work for them anymore.

Kendall: What's happening in the Antarctic with the Japanese whalers?

Watson: A moratorium on commercial whaling went into effect in 1986. In 1987 Japan set up the Institute of Cetacean Research to continue whaling under the guise of scientific research. That is what we are opposing today.

The Japanese are targeting protected and endangered whales, such as humpbacks and fins, in an established international whale sanctuary, in violation of the global moratorium and the Antarctic Treaty. There is no difference between these Japanese whalers and elephant poachers in east Africa, except that poachers are poor and often get shot and the whalers are businessmen and operate with impunity.

Kendall: Tell me about your engagement with the Japanese whaling vessel *Shōnan Maru 2* and the loss of Sea Shepherd's *Ady Gil*.

Watson: In 2010 we sent three vessels down to the Antarctic to protect the whales: the *Steve Irwin*, out of Australia; the *Bob Barker*, which left from Africa; and the *Ady Gil*, which came out of New Zealand. The *Ady Gil* was our fast interceptor

vessel, the first one we had that could keep up with the harpoon boats. The other two vessels had to concentrate on stopping the larger factory ship. The *Ady Gil* proved very effective in stopping the harpoon boats. Then it came back to the *Bob Barker* and waited to be refueled. The entire crew was on deck when the *Shōnan Maru 2* went steaming by. It's a "security vessel" — a harpoon boat manned by security personnel. The *Shōnan Maru 2* made an abrupt turn right into the *Ady Gil*, which was unable to get out of the way. It cut the *Ady Gil* nearly in half and totally destroyed it. There was no way to salvage the boat, though we tried. The crew did manage to remove all the oil. Not a drop spilled. The crash had ripped open the fuel tanks, but fortunately those were empty.

We tried to tow the wrecked vessel to the French base on the coast, but it was like towing a bucket through the water: it just kept filling up. So we contacted the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, which advised us to give them the location and let it sink.

Afterward the Japanese whaling operation put out a press release accusing us of polluting the pristine waters of Antarctica with our abandoned vessel and diesel fuel. It was just propaganda. We didn't release any fuel, and even if we had, they were the ones who'd cut our boat in half. Our crew did everything it could.

Kendall: You referred to the Japanese whaler "ramming" the *Ady Gil*. I saw the video footage on television, and to my untrained eye it looked as if the *Ady Gil* had drifted into the side of the whaler.

Watson: The *Ady Gil* was drifting, but the *Shōnan Maru 2* was moving at twenty knots and made an abrupt turn into the boat. Pete [the captain of the *Ady Gil*] was able to start the engine, but he had hardly begun to move before they were hit. It would have been very easy for the *Ady Gil* to have avoided the collision if it had been moving. You can see on the video that the *Shōnan Maru 2* also hit the crew of the *Ady Gil* with water cannons and sonic weapons called "LRADS" [long-range acoustic devices] that are used for crowd dispersal.

Kendall: Was the *Ady Gil* insured?

Watson: No, we can't insure any of our vessels, because what we do is too dangerous. This was a \$2 million ship that was deliberately rammed and sunk by Japanese whalers without any repercussions. I mean, if I had sunk a Japanese ship down there, I guarantee the Australian Navy would have had me under arrest. But these poachers get away with anything they want. The *Ady Gil* was sunk inside the waters of the Australian Antarctic Territory. There is an ongoing investigation by Maritime New Zealand and the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, but Japan refuses to cooperate, so nothing can be done.

Kendall: Can you not go to Japan and file charges against the whaling company?

Watson: [Laughs.] I guess in theory we could, but the chances we would win are pretty remote. The Japanese protect their own.

Kendall: The Australian federal police boarded the *Bob Barker* and the *Steve Irwin* when the ships got back to Aus-

tralia, apparently to comply with a request from the Japanese government to investigate whether Sea Shepherd had breached maritime law.

Watson: Yes, they came on board, even though [Australian prime minister] Kevin Rudd said he had not sent them. They came at the request of the Japanese. When did the Australian police start taking orders from the Japanese?

They accused us of criminal activity, and I asked why they said nothing about the sinking and destruction of the *Ady Gil* and the attempted murder of six of our crew members. They said we would have to take that up with the Japanese authorities.

We won't hear from them again. I think they were just doing it to show the Japanese they were living up to whatever agreement they have. But I wish they would put us under arrest and charge us in an Australian court. It would be a wonderful opportunity to get this whole matter aired out in public, in a country where 94 percent of the population is against whaling. I think it would expose Japan's ongoing illegal activities to the world. We have unbelievable support from the people of Australia, but the government is more interested in appeasing the Japanese, as is the New Zealand government, and everybody else, really. Japan is an economic bully and gets what it wants.

Kendall: The International Whaling Commission recently proposed a plan whereby Iceland, Norway, and Japan would be allowed to hunt whales for meat, with a reduction in the numbers allowed over the next ten years. Do you oppose that plan?

Watson: That's sort of like saying to a bunch of bank robbers, "We'll let you rob banks on Mondays if you take only so much money." You don't compromise with criminals or poachers. I think that proposal has been rejected anyway.

This area where the Japanese are whale hunting is called the "Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary." What is it about the word *sanctuary* they don't seem to understand? In a sanctuary you have zero quota, so any hunting is unacceptable. As long as this area is designated under law as a sanctuary, we are going to protect it.

Kendall: Do you ever see killing whales for meat as justifiable?

Watson: I don't, personally. I think it is an abomination. But the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society is not opposed to whaling. It is opposed to *illegal* whaling.

Kendall: Why is it your job to enforce the laws of the oceans?

Watson: That's a good question. I wish the countries that are signatories to the laws would enforce them, but they don't seem to have the political or economic will to do so. The United Nations World Charter for Nature states in section 21(e) that nongovernmental organizations and individuals are empowered to uphold international conservation law "in areas beyond national jurisdiction." So we actually have a legal right to intervene.

Kendall: Is Sea Shepherd the only enforcer of marine-protection laws?

Watson: On the international waters, yes, as far as I know.

I haven't come across any other groups doing what we do.

Kendall: Do most governments view your actions as legal?

Watson: The only government that has put me on trial is Canada's. Back in 1993 I chased Cuban and Spanish drag trawlers off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. This was outside the two-hundred-mile limit of Canadian jurisdiction, but I was arrested by Canadian authorities anyway and charged with criminal mischief and endangering life and property. It was a four-week trial and cost the government millions of dollars.

There were forty-five government witnesses against me. I was the only witness in my defense, but I was still acquitted. My defense was the UN World Charter for Nature and what is called "color of rights," meaning that I had the right to intervene, or it was my understanding that I had the right to intervene. The only country that would not allow this defense is the United States, because the U.S. did not sign the UN World Charter for Nature.

Sea Shepherd answers to only one country, the Netherlands, because we fly the Dutch flag. Japan has made plenty of complaints to the Dutch registry, but there hasn't been a single investigation, and no violations have been filed against us. The Dutch foreign minister was pressured by Japan to remove our flag, but they could not because we were compliant with all Dutch regulations. So the Dutch tried to introduce special legislation to remove our flag for any action that would upset diplomatic relationships between the Netherlands and another country. It was outrageous, and the Dutch public objected strongly to it. Even if the legislation is eventually proposed, we estimate it will take three to four years for it to pass. In the meantime we have not been charged with a single violation.

Kendall: So everything you do is legal according to Dutch law?

Watson: I believe it is. In thirty-two years of operations, nobody in Sea Shepherd has been convicted of a felony. We have never been sued, and we have never injured anybody. But still people call us "ecoterrorists," "pirates," and so on.

When people began calling us "pirates," we designed our own pirate flag, and it's proven to be our most successful marketing logo. Of course the whalers are the real outlaws, but sometimes it takes a pirate to stop a pirate. Back in the seventeenth century, when piracy was out of control in the Caribbean, it wasn't the British Navy that shut it down. In fact, British military officers, merchants, and politicians were all taking bribes from the pirates. Piracy was shut down by the actions of one man, Henry Morgan, a pirate. The British government had to reward him for his success, so it knighted him and made him the deputy governor of Jamaica.

In Sea Shepherd we like to look on ourselves as compassionate pirates, not pirates in pursuit of profit. It's quite a noble legacy. Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh, Jean Lafitte, and John Paul Jones, the founder of the U.S. Navy, were all pirates.

Kendall: So the actions that you take — such as throwing sour milk onto the decks of whaling ships — are legal actions?

Watson: They are not illegal. I consider our attacks a non-toxic, biodegradable, organic form of chemical warfare. The

Japanese news says that we throw acid at whalers. Rotten butter is an acid, but it's less acidic than beer. It's noncorrosive, non-irritating, and nontoxic. But it stinks like you wouldn't believe.

Kendall: And it's slippery.

Watson: We make it slippery by adding methyl cellulose to it. That's a food-grade product used to coat pills and make them easier to swallow. When mixed with water, it becomes super slippery. It's pretty hard to go about your work when you can't stand up and everything stinks to high heaven.

For this the former premier of Newfoundland called me an "ecoterrorist" and said I wasn't welcome in Newfoundland. But I am a Canadian and will go any damn place in Newfoundland I choose to go. If the premier thinks I am a criminal, then he can bloody well arrest me.

Kendall: You say that Sea Shepherd "adheres to the utilization of nonviolent principles in the course of all actions." What's your definition of *violence*?

Watson: My definition is the same as Martin Luther King Jr.'s, Mahatma Gandhi's, and Nelson Mandela's. King said you cannot commit an act of violence against a nonsentient object, only against a living being. We have never injured a single person in our entire history, and we are proud of that record. I spent six months in Africa in 1978, tracking elephant poachers with park rangers. The rangers were killing the poachers, but I would not do that. I did destroy their vehicles and their weapons. If you damage property in order to prevent the death of a sentient being — that is, if you damage a harpoon or a gun or a rifle — it's an act of *nonviolence*.

There is a difference between nonviolence and pacifism. Mahatma Gandhi once said, when somebody called him a pacifist, "I've never advocated passive anything." Pacifism is the act of doing nothing. Nonviolence is a tactic. Clearly it worked against the British, but many have wondered if it would have been as effective against the likes of Hitler or Stalin. You have to choose your strategies according to your enemies.

I think nonviolence has been turned into some kind of sacred cause, but people have to use a little common sense in its application. In 1986 I was running for member of parliament with the Green Party of Canada, and they wanted to kick me out of the party for being violent — i.e., sinking ships. So we had a big debate on it at Green Party headquarters. I pointed out that the Green Party is pro-choice, and so am I, but you cannot argue that abortion is not violent; you're destroying living tissue. They were telling me it's nonviolent to destroy an unborn baby, but it's violent to destroy two pieces of metal. Humans are really good at justifying violence when we want to use it.

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