



Making a Movement

Text Aaron “Bertie” Gekoski
Photos Courtesy of Sea Shepherd

SHARING STORIES, SHUNNING SUSHI, OR SINKING SHIPS: THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO ENVIRONMENTALISM. ON THE EVE OF SEA SHEPHERD’S 40TH ANNIVERSARY, AARON “BERTIE” GEKOSKI CAUGHT UP WITH ONE MAN WHO’S ADOPTED A MORE HANDS-ON APPROACH THAN MOST

Every year, billions of trees are cut down so we can plant crops to feed over seven billion mouths. Rising water temperatures are rendering coral reefs bleached and lifeless. It’s predicted that by 2050, there will be more plastic in our oceans than fish; more wrappers than wrasse, and more bottles than bottlenose dolphins.

Given the magnitude of these issues, it’s easy to be overwhelmed. *What can I do? Where should I focus my efforts?* These questions are

bandied around, as people scramble for answers, or try and be more environmentally responsible citizens.

Everyone has their own way of making a difference. Some start by making manageable, bite-sized changes to their everyday lives. They recycle, turn off the lights, eat less fish and beef, or share conservation stories and images on social media.

Others make environmentalism their lives and become scientists, campaigners or researchers.



LEFT Sea Shepherd is actively involved in anti-whaling and launched its 11th Antarctic whale defense campaign called Operation Nemesis in late 2016

BOTTOM Plastic pollution is one of the greatest environmental threats facing our oceans. Sea Shepherd has teamed up with Adidas to make trainers out of marine debris

As a presenter at SZtv, I document conservation issues and initiatives, package them up as entertaining films, and broadcast them through the media.

Then there are those that assume a more “active” role. Captain Paul Watson – who needs no introduction – has spent over half a century harassing, chasing, ramming and disabling those he deems a threat to the planet. Greenpeace – no strangers to controversy themselves – once even called him a “violent extremist”.

As I caught up with Watson on Skype, he dismissed this label. “I don’t consider myself an extremist and I don’t think what we do is radical. I’m a conservative: You don’t get more conservative than being a conservationist. Radicals and extremists are out there trying to destroy the planet.”

“I’m a conservative: You don’t get more conservative than being a conservationist”

Captain Paul Watson

It’s hard to keep up with Watson. Every sentence tumbles out faster than you can sink a Japanese whaling fleet. He mixes razor-sharp observations with literary references, anecdotes, metaphors and statistics. By the time I’ve absorbed one point, he’s made another three.

50 YEARS OF ACTIVISM

Watson’s life as an activist began at the age of 11, when he would destroy beaver traps near his home in St. Andrews-By-The-Sea, New Brunswick, Canada. By 1969 he went on to form a group called the Don’t Make a Wave Committee, which, he claims, would later go on to become Greenpeace. Whilst Greenpeace deny Watson was a founding member, his claims are backed up in the film *How to Change the World*, about the first decade of the organisation.

Watson’s methods, however, were deemed too controversial and they parted ways in 1977. He believes this was the best thing that ever happened to him.





“Hanging banners and taking pictures only gets you so far,” he says, whilst referring to organisation Greenpeace as the “Avon ladies of the environmental movement”.

Whilst Greenpeace brings in hundreds of millions of Euros every year in donations, Sea Shepherd only raises a fraction of this. “If people want to protect our planet, they seek us out. Sea Shepherd is operated by those with passion. I ask people if they would put their lives on the line for a whale. If they say ‘no’ we won’t take them.”

Watson doesn’t view Sea Shepherd as an organisation, but rather a movement. “You can shut down an individual or a company, but you can’t stop a movement.” This movement has evolved to include 10 vessels (making them the world’s largest non-governmental navy, Watson believes), 165 full-time crew, and up to 10 times that number in volunteers.

It’s an ever-evolving beast that even Watson can’t keep up with. “I heard last year that Sea Shepherd Nicaragua had rescued two turtles. I didn’t even know we had a Sea Shepherd Nicaragua,” he jokes.

Watson’s role has also evolved over the years and he now adopts what he calls an “Admiral’s position” – coordinating rather than chasing. It is an enforced absence: He has two Interpol red notices filed against him, due to clashes with the Japanese and Costa Ricans, going back 15 years. As a result, he cannot travel anywhere other than the United States or France. “Interpol red notices are primarily for serial killers, drug traffickers and war criminals. I’m the only person in history put on that list for conspiracy to trespass on a whaling ship.”

The travel ban does little to dampen the Sea Shepherd mystique: the Admiral imprisoned in his own

country, consigned to his keyboard, as his soldiers continue to wage war against the “radicals”.

SAILING ON STARS

It sounds like the plot of a Hollywood film – and if it were made into one, there would be no shortage of actors wanting to be involved. Supporter Sean Connery might make the perfect Paul Watson. Sea Shepherd’s Hollywood links have bolstered its media profile and fuelled their growth. Brigitte Bardot and Sam Simon bought them boats. Other donors include Pierce Brosnan and Martin Sheen. “We can’t lose because we have two James Bonds and a former president on our side,” he jokes.

Sea Shepherd have succeeded in doing what others have failed at: They have made conservation “cool” – fighting for a noble cause, chasing illegal fishermen on the high seas.



LEFT Dead thresher and blue sharks lie on the deck of the Reina Del Cisne

ABOVE Plastics in the marine environment have significant ecological impacts causing welfare and conservation concerns including ingestion, entanglement and strangulation to marine wildlife

BOTTOM LEFT Sea Shepherd has spent years campaigning to protect tuna, whose populations are on the brink of collapse

BOTTOM CENTRE Illegal gill nets are a huge threat to marine life, entangling and killing many species, including sharks

BOTTOM RIGHT Turtles are particularly vulnerable to all forms of waste

When Sea Shepherd was accused of being pirates in the 1990s, Watson countered: “What’s wrong with pirates? Pirates get things done – look at Sir Walter Raleigh or Sir Francis Drake.” Then, in typically provocative style, and in a marketing masterstroke, he designed their famous Jolly Roger logo.

No one could ever accuse Sea Shepherd of not “getting things done”.

Their current campaigns include protecting the critically endangered vaquita in Mexico, intercepting and arresting illegal fishing operators off West Africa, identifying viruses and parasites from farmed salmon, and helping Adidas produce a trainer made out of marine debris.

The Japanese, of course, still receive their fair share of attention.

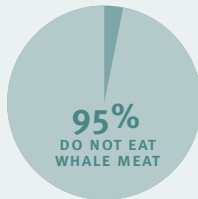
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SPOTLIGHT ON WHALING



Japan was heavily involved in commercial whaling until the International Whaling Commission (IWC) moratorium of 1986, but they continue to whale under Article VIII – so-called “scientific whaling”



A 2006 research report by the Nippon Research Centre revealed that 95 percent of Japanese have never eaten, or very rarely eat, whale meat

AMOUNT OF UNEATEN FROZEN WHALE MEAT



The amount of uneaten frozen whale meat doubled to 4,600 tonnes between 2002 and 2012. The government still subsidises whaling by about USD50 million a year



Policymakers have urged the IWC to encourage the development of commercial whale watching, which generates more than USD1 billion in annual revenues worldwide



In March 2017, a Japanese whaling fleet returned from an Antarctic hunt that killed more than 300 minke whales – despite the IWC moratoria

Data sourced from WWF, IWC, Nippon Research Center, The Guardian



They used to kill over 1,000 whales in a season – Watson claims that the reduction in their quota to 333 is due to Sea Shepherd’s efforts.

It was, in fact, one of his first whaling missions that had the greatest impact on Watson’s career. “We were blocking whales from a harpoon vessel, when they fired over our heads, hitting one of the pod. Another whale dove underneath us and

threw itself at them, so they struck him with another harpoon.

“As he fell back in agony, he came out of the water at an angle that could have come crashing down on us. I looked into his eye and what I saw there was life changing: The whale clearly knew what we were trying to do. Then I saw him fall back and drown... that whale could have killed me but chose not to.”

It’s estimated there are over 6,500 whales in the ocean that wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Sea Shepherd and Paul Watson



As Watson sat there amongst a Soviet whaling fleet in the ocean, he was left alone with his thoughts. “So here we are, killing this incredibly intelligent, beautiful, self-aware creature for oil [from its blubber], which is used in the construction of intercontinental missiles... to make a weapon for the mass extermination of human beings. It struck me like a lightning bolt: We are ecologically insane. From that moment on I said:

ABOVE Japan is a signatory to the IWC’s moratorium of 1986, but it uses “scientific research” as a loophole for killing whales

LEFT Captain Paul Watson

I’m not going to do this for people; I’m going to do this for them.”

It’s estimated there are over 6,500 whales in the ocean that wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Sea Shepherd and Paul Watson. People won’t always agree with their methods, but that’s activism for you. In order to get things done, you need to ruffle some feathers. And one thing’s for sure: Few have contributed more to our oceans. ♦AG

AARON “BERTIE” GEKOSKI is a presenter at SZtv (www.scubazoo.tv), a new online wildlife channel by Scubazoo. Asian Geographic have partnered with them to bring you their new show, *Borneo Wildlife Warriors*.