

Excerpt from More Good News: Real Solutions to the Global Eco-Crisis, Holly Dressel & David Suzuki, Greystone Press, 2010; pp. 286-292. With the permission of the authors"

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Canada isn't alone. Around the world, with the possible exception of Kenya's little preserve, parts of Florida, or Costa Rica (the country recognized as having the best consolidated system), there are very few places with exemplary fisheries and oceans policies in place upon which we might model others. Even the usual shining examples of social and environmental responsibility, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland, are actually leading efforts to murder whales and other large marine mammals, killing even more than the whalers of Japan, who slaughter thousands of animals a year for "research purposes." That's in order to get around the whaling ban of the International Whaling Commission, to which these four countries are all signatories. Where do they kill them? Inside supposed MPAs or national preserves, like a huge one extending down to the Antarctic from Australia. Australia should be patrolling this area. Instead it turns a blind eye to the Japanese as they plunder what's left of the highest trophic levels of marine life.

This blind eye afflicts most of the governments on Earth. Journalist George Monbiot had to watch scallop dredgers in summer 2009 destroy the seafloor of Cardigan Bay, off the coast of his native Wales. He wrote, "The Cardigan Bay dolphins are one of only two substantial resident populations left in British seas. It is partly for their sake that most of the coastal waters of the bay are classified as special areas of conservation (SACS). This grants them the strictest protection available under European Union law." Looks great on paper, but typically of MPA legislation, reality is something else again. Monbiot asked piteously, "The bay is strictly protected. It can't be damaged, and the dolphins and other rare marine life can't be disturbed. So why the heck has a fleet of scallop dredgers been allowed to rip it to pieces?"

Monbiot described how his neighbors and a group called Friends of Cardigan Bay harassed the Countryside Council for Wales to do something; the council moaned in reply that their powers aren't explicit, that "the precautionary principle," which they're supposed to be exercising, "is a vague term," and put off a decision until after the end of the dredging season. "In twenty-four years of journalism I have not come across a starker example of bureaucratic cowardice," Monbiot fumed. "The boats are not resident here. They move around the coastline trashing one habitat after another. They will fish until there is nothing left to destroy, then move to the next functioning ecosystem. If, in a few decades, the scallops here recover, they'll return to tear this place up again." He wrote about the noble claims of government-sponsored MPA movements around the world and concluded, "as I have seen in Cardigan Bay, it doesn't matter what they say they'll do if no one is prepared to enforce it." And with a very few exceptions, there's only one person on this entire planet who is actually enforcing marine protection law.

Saltwater Hero

I never realized how much he risked, including his own safety. He literally walks into the lion's mouth like Daniel and continues to speak truth to power and call them out. I have never seen anyone ever challenge authority or challenge evil that way. And he pays the price for it.

Actor and sea shepherd supporter Martin Sheen

Readers may have seen an extremely popular television program on the cable channel Animal Planet called Whale Wars. It's a simple reality show. A film crew gets on board one of the two ships operated by the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, a marine NGO, and follows it around as its crew picks up people, repairs its often failing equipment, gets lost in ice fogs or trapped by glaciers, searches for whalers on the trackless seas, and confronts, head-on, the Japanese whaling

fleet, shooting rancid butter at the harpoon decks and physically interposing their little inflatables in the icy waters between the harpooners and the whales. It all takes place in what is supposed to be a no-kill preserve claimed (but not adequately protected) by Australia, deep into the Antarctic. One episode showed returning crew members and Discovery Channel filmmakers having their entire season's film seized by the Australian government at the behest of the Japanese (they went to court and got it returned); another shows a bullet fired by the Japanese nearly killing Paul Watson, the famous founder of Sea Shepherd. It's nail-biting action, and along with a recent feature called Sharkwater on the slaughter of another marine species, it's making Watson a global star.

Born in Canada's Maritimes, Paul Watson has been known for thirty years as an "environmental radical," destructive of property, although strictly nonviolent and even comical when it comes to his organization's actions against people. He helped found Greenpeace, but when it turned away from direct action campaigns, it lost Watson. To this day he remains the only person who has taken his helpless outrage at our treatment of the creatures who live in our oceans to the next step: physical confrontation. Watson sunk half the Icelandic whaling fleet in the 1980s and has become the world's expert on ramming, being more practiced at it than any modern navy. He does so to damage and cripple the huge boats illegally harvesting sea life so that they have to limp back to port for repairs, thereby cutting into their short killing season. Every year Sea Shepherd's activities are estimated to save the lives of around five hundred whales, including the huge majority of the population of endangered fin whales, as well as thousands of sharks, dolphins, and other forms of sea life. Until the next hunting season, that is, when, with the connivance of the very governments that have signed whaling bans or that supposedly defend MPAs, whaling fleets manned by Norwegians, Icelanders, or Japanese fishers set off to plunder again.

Marine equipment, that the Japanese have taken to ramming, at considerable danger to his crew's lives, doesn't come cheap. Paul Watson's NGO nonetheless devotes huge amounts of energy and money to protecting the creatures that live in our oceans. He doesn't worry too much about the way media and government have demonized him, saying, "we are answerable only to our clients." He doesn't mean Sea Shepherd members, the coastal communities asking for help, or financial supporters. He means, "whales, sharks, sea turtles, seabirds, dolphins, seals, fish, invertebrates, and plankton."

Watson writes that "the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society has been in existence since August 1977 and during that entire period...we have never injured a single person, sustained a single serious injury, or been convicted of a felony crime anywhere in the world.

Despite this, the stories are spread throughout the media that we are pirates, extremists, criminals, and even 'terrorists.' Why is this? Because our small non-governmental organization is the only conservation organization in the world that has the guts to take on superpowers and organized crime like the Yakuza, the shark fin mafia, and corrupt politicians."

In a wash of depressing news about the state of our oceans, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society—tiny, unique, embattled, indomitable—is one very rare piece of good news. The two ships and one helicopter that Sea Shepherd deploys operate in open zones or in ones that are supposedly under some sort of official protection. Australia can't complain when Watson chases off Japanese monster boats that are taking whales out of their waters illegally. Watson's popularity in that country and in neighboring New Zealand, where he enjoys support from the influential indigenous Maori community, has prevented the government from denying him access to their ports. There he generally receives a hero's welcome from the populace; the Australian government may not care about the whale populations, but most Aussies do.

So, although vilified as a pirate by the whalers he pursues and certainly by Canada's sealers, and often arrested when he comes into port, Watson is also a hero in the many small countries that solicit his help, such as Ecuador, Chile, and Brazil, as well as Senegal, South Africa, Singapore, and Dubai. In 2000 Sea Shepherd signed an agreement with Ecuador

to help that nation patrol and protect the Galapagos Islands, another World Heritage site being targeted by poachers, “eco-tourism” operators, and pirates seeking to kill sharks, the famous but endangered Galapagos tortoises, the islands’ giant marine iguanas, and sea cucumbers. Sea Shepherd donated a 95-foot patrol boat and a full-time officer to the Galapagos almost a decade ago. Since then this work has extended to Ecuador’s mainland, where Sea Shepherd helps the Ecuadorian Environmental Police protect one of the rarest mammals on Earth, the Amazon pink dolphin.

In 2007 the country awarded Paul Watson the Amazon Peace Prize for his work on both the islands and the mainland, and now, thanks to the Whale Wars series, he’s also become a hero in places like the U.K., the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand. But largely because of his long opposition to the Canadian seal hunt, a mom-and-apple-pie voting issue in the Maritimes, he remains a pariah in his own country. Even the CBC is remarkably biased against Sea Shepherd’s work.

In winter 2007, Watson was preparing to sail out of Australia to try to intercept the killing machine of the Japanese whaling fleet as they arrived in Australian waters to illegally slaughter whales. For most of a decade, Watson had been sailing under the flag of his own country, Canada. But just as he was ready to depart, and without any warning, newly elected Prime Minister Stephen Harper pulled his boat’s registration. Harper gave no legal justification for doing so, but it was so late in the game Watson had no choice but to set sail or let the whales die. Without a formal registration, he would be on the high seas illegally himself, subject to any form of violence that the Japanese, or any other enemy, would care to dish out.

A few months previously, two representatives of a small group of Iroquois traditionalists from Quebec, Stuart Myiow Junior and Senior, had attended a Sierra Club of Canada national conference to deliver a workshop on native beliefs. Watson was a keynote speaker there, and they were in the audience. The Myiows were electrified by his account of his life and work. Following the talk they approached him as he was rushing off to catch a plane to get back to sea and asked if they could perform a special protection ceremony and present him with a medicine bag. The ceremony was an unusual and moving moment out on the grounds of the college hosting the conference, with Watson’s ride to the airport waiting in the background.

“We wanted to help somehow,” Stuart Myiow Junior explained, “and all we could think to do was one of our most powerful ceremonies of protection. I don’t know why I brought the medicine bag with me, and the tobacco and all that we needed—I just did.” After this encounter, Myiow’s longhouse, the small Mohawk Traditional Council on the Kahnawake Reserve just outside of Montreal, continued to follow Sea Shepherd’s activities on their website. When Harper pulled Watson’s flag, these friends racked their brains for what to do. “We thought, well, the Iroquois are a sovereign nation, as defined by our treaties with Canada; we have the right to travel without passports and to bargain with the government as equals. So why not register a ship?” They wrote Paul Watson, offering him a flag and registration documents. The flag was sent at once, but the full registration had to wait until the following June, when Watson made a rare trip to Eastern Canada to receive his flag.

The Mohawk Traditional Council experienced their own adventures with the flag and registry. Like most grassroots groups passionate about the environment, they’re a small minority in the Kahnawake community, which is also only one of the eight reserves of the six nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. Other native people both in and outside their reserve challenged their right to speak for everyone and issue a flag in the entire confederacy’s name. Stuart Myiow Junior made what turned out to be the perfect reply. He told his critics they were absolutely right: he and his group didn’t have that kind of power. But the nation as a whole did. While they might start the very long process of discussing it and trying to come to a consensus, the whales would be killed.

“It came down to a choice between doing what little we can, as soon as possible, or doing nothing and letting the animals die,” Stuart said. And the critics, to their everlasting credit, agreed. The flag was presented in the name of the

entire Iroquois Confederacy, and it flies in full sight of the Whale Wars cameras today, an object of pride to many members of the Canadian aboriginal community and of course to that small group that wanted so much to help. As for Watson, he says that in all his life no one has ever done anything quite like that for him before—especially someone from his own country. He’s even placed the story of his alliance with the Mohawk Traditional Council on Sea Shepherd’s website, right next to another treasured letter of support, from the Dalai Lama.

The oceans are huge. Each one of us feels very small in comparison. Most of us spend our lives far away from the slaughtered wildlife and acidifying reefs, on land. And most of us don’t have much money or political influence. But as Paul Watson and the Mohawk Traditional Council have demonstrated, that’s no excuse not to do whatever we can to help, given the trouble our oceans are in. If much larger numbers of us actually do try, there’s no telling how many creatures, how much ocean, we can save.