

Case 7: Shepherding in a New Era of Conservation

Edward Abbey's The Monkey Wrench Gang inspired a generation of environmental activists to get active. While Abbey's fictional portrayal of tactics may have inspired acts of 'ecotage' or 'ecoterrorism' perpetrated by Earth First!, the Earth Liberation Front, the Sea Shepherds, and a slew of other groups, these groups are motivated by much more than fiction.¹ And the Sea Shepherds recently moved our fascination with 'ecotage' from the bookshelf to reality television. The popular program "Whale Wars" depicts the conflict off the coast of Antarctica between the Japanese Institute of Cetacean Research, Japanese government-sanctioned whaling ships, and the Sea Shepherds.²

Depending on the country telling the story of the conflict, one may view the Shepherds' actions as unjustified violence against legitimate scientific research or as non-violent delay tactics aimed at preventing the violation of international whaling bans (claiming research is a mere pretext). The Sea Shepherds state that their mission is to "use innovative direct-action tactics to investigate, document, and take action when necessary to expose and confront illegal activities on the high seas."³ Their actions, however, create controversy. Sea Shepherd Captain Paul Watson openly shares his approach.

"In 31 years harassing and confronting whalers, sealers and illegal fishers, we have never injured a single person, never been convicted of a felony, or been sued. Sea Shepherd does not condone, nor do we practise, violence,' he says. . . . But he freely admits damaging property. In a lifetime of confrontations beginning with Canadian sealers, he has used 'prop foulers' to sabotage ships, boarded whaling vessels, and sunk several in Iceland and Norway."⁴

But the media serves as one of the greatest weapons employed by the Sea Shepherds. The television show provides video evidence narrated by the Sea Shepherds of the interactions between the Japanese whaling ships and the group. Moreover, the Shepherds regularly provide press releases, especially to countries nearest to the conflict, detailing their confrontations. Occasionally they also document their own legal woes, as when crew members are arrested for alleged criminal acts. As Captain Watson put it, "There are many who condemn my crew and I for taking the law into our own hands and for taking on the barons of corporate profit. There are some who would like to see us jailed or even dead, so blinded are they to the conceit and folly of their own anthropomorphism [sic]."

While the choice between replaceable vessels and irreplaceable wildlife seems easy, the battle involves many other facets—the freedom of sovereign nations to govern their own economies, the livelihood of those involved with the whaling research (assuming the Japanese fleet legitimately researches), the violation of certain laws by the Shepherds in their quest to stop whaling, and the involvement of the media in making the Sea Shepherd's side of the story known (and giving them greater incentive to continue confronting the whaling vessels).

¹ Wikipedia contains a wealth of pages dedicated to these groups, ecoterrorism, ecotage, and Abbey's life and works, and links to firsthand sources to aid in understanding the history of this movement.

² "Hardline warrior in war to save the whale," New Zealand Herald, Jan. 11, 2010, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10619393.

³ "Sea Shepherd's Mission Statement," Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, <http://www.seashepherd.org/who-we-are/> (last accessed Aug. 1, 2010).

⁴ "Hardline warrior in war to save the whale," New Zealand Herald, Jan. 11, 2010, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10619393.

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