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The “Good” Pirate The *Bite Back* Interview with Paul Watson



Paul Watson. Photo courtesy of Greenpeace

Paul Watson’s Ten Commandments Lifestyle changes needed are in this order:

1. Don’t bring any more humans into being. There are enough of us.
2. Spay and neuter every domestic animal possible—there are enough of them.
3. Go vegan and reduce your consumption of resources.
4. Dare to think outside the matrix i.e. outside the dominant paradigm created by mass media, industry and government.
5. Make your life count for something before you die.
6. Live your life in accordance to the laws of

Is he the Captain Hook or James Bond for the animals? You could say he’s both.

Paul Watson is the original captain of the meddlesome boat that policed the seas for illegal whalers in the 1980s. He’s the guy who traveled to the frozen hinterlands of Canada to protect those fuzzy white baby seals from being bludgeoned for their fur.

Captain Paul Watson is a founding member of Greenpeace and in 1977 founded the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. His books *Seal Wars* and *Ocean Warrior* recount his 25 years working to protect marine life. Here, Watson gives straight answers to *Bite Back* magazine.

The Sea Shepherd flagship has its bow filled with cement for ramming other boats, is armed with water-cannons, protected by electrical barbed wire, and flies the skull and crossbones on its flag. Are you the captain of a 21st century pirate vessel?

In a world of pirates, how can the real pirates be identified? The word pirate conjures up many images that run the spectrum from romantic to ruthless, greedy to generous, adventurous to terrorist.

I fight piracy, but my campaigns against illegal fishing and whaling were often met with accusations that it was myself and my crew who were the pirates. I found this amusing and incorporated the romance of the pirate into the Sea Shepherd image. To that end, I designed our very own joli rouge or Jolly Roger: in place of the crossed bones, I crossed a shepherd’s staff with a trident.

I look upon myself as a good pirate in pursuit of bad pirates. Like any pirate, I seek a treasure but I wish for my treasure to remain in the sea, whereas those I pursue are intent upon plundering our oceans of life, diversity, and beauty.

I am a good pirate because in my entire career I have caused no death and inflicted no injury to the people who have shot at us, bombed, beaten, jailed us, and threatened our lives. My crew and I have saved countless lives of creatures as diverse as sea cucumbers to sharks, sea turtles to whales, seal to cod, and so many more. So to answer your question: In a world run by evil, profit-mongering, violent, resource plundering, mass killing buccaneers, I am one of those rare pirates who seeks not profit,

ecology.

7. Reject anthropocentrism and adopt a biocentric perspective.

8. Dare to fail. Dare to live. Dare to be immune from the opinions of humanity.

9. Love this life. It's the only one you will ever have so take advantage of it while you can.

10. Don't get caught by the forces of anthropocentrism.

nor blood, or treasure. I seek stability and conservation, protection, and the satisfaction of saving lives.

The action that put Sea Shepherd on the map was the ramming and subsequent sinking of the notorious whaling ship the Sierra. Can you recount this story for us, and what implications this one action had for both the conservation movement and the whaling industry?

In July 1979, I hunted down, rammed, and disabled the pirate whaling ship Sierra, because for 10 years I watched as the International Whaling Commission and world governments did nothing to stop a ship that was blatantly flaunting international regulations protecting whales.

I set out from Boston in the Sea Shepherd with a crew of 19 volunteers, found the Sierra 200 miles off the Portuguese coast, and chased her into the harbor of Leixoes. I gave my crew the option of departing if they did not wish to risk arrest by the Portuguese authorities. Seventeen of them left, leaving me, Peter Woof and Jerry Doran, two engineers.

The three of us fired up the engine and made for the Sierra, which was in the middle of the harbor. I hit her at full speed across the bow to give warning, then made a tight circle and hit her as fast and as hard as I could on her port side. I saw Captain Nordegen firing a rifle at me but he was not a very good shot and I was a moving target. My bow sliced the Sierra open to the water line and forced her to go to a dock. We then fled, with the Portuguese Navy in pursuit. I was brought before the Port Captain and charged with gross criminal negligence. I replied by saying that there was nothing negligent about the ramming because I hit the bastard exactly where I intended to. The Port Captain actually laughed and said that I was technically right. He also could not identify the real owner of the Sierra, and said that until he did so, I was free to go.

I returned in December to try and steal the ship from the harbor because a Portuguese judge had taken a bribe and ordered my ship turned over to the Sierra Trading Company. My crew and I were unable to steal the ship because it had been looted by the Portuguese police. So to prevent the ship from becoming the property of the Sierra Trading Company, we scuttled the Sea Shepherd on New Year's eve in Leixoes harbor.

Meanwhile, the Sierra had been repaired and was ready to return to sea. It never did so: on February 6, 1980, my crew blew the bottom out of her and permanently ended her career. We traded a ship for a ship, but it was a great trade because we also traded our ship for the lives of hundreds of whales.

During your activist career you have worked with, and had on your crew, many big name and up-and-coming animal rights activists (Alex Pacheco—co-founder of PETA—and Rod Coronado, the most famous U.S. ALF activist). What about Sea Shepherd's actions draws in such support, and what sort of impact does this form of direct action activism leave on their lives?

I see them as examples of how individuals can make a difference. I witnessed them transform their compassion into passionate activism and I admire them both. I am proud indeed that Sea Shepherd was able to contribute to their education as activists.

One of the objectives I have always had was to use Sea Shepherd as a vehicle to empower people. This is the reason that we take volunteers from around the world without concern for skill and experience.

Sea Shepherd is an experience that allows for the understanding that an individual can change the world. We have had about 2,000 people crew on Sea Shepherd campaigns over the last 25 years. Many have gone on to work with other organizations like Earth Island Institute, Rainforest Action Network, PETA, etc. Others have gone on as individuals to make

a difference.

We have also attracted the support of celebrities, and this has helped considerably. We live in a media culture and this means that actors and musicians have more credibility to speak on a wide range of issues than the experts in their respective fields. Our organization has the support of Pierce Brosnan, Martin Sheen, William Shatner, and Richard Dean Anderson. How can we fail when we have James Bond, Captain Kirk, the President of the United States and McGyver [on our side]?

One of the last paragraphs of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society's charter says that "SSCS opposes and has taken a standard against violence in the protection of the oceans. It condemns and deplores eco-terrorism and other violence in the name of conservation." Considering what Sea Shepherd is famous for, the sinking of whaling ships, can you define what you mean by 'eco-terrorism' and 'violence' when used in the name of conservation?

Eco-terrorism is a form of violence usually carried out by corporations. The Exxon Valdez was an eco-terrorist ship. Union Carbide conducted eco-terrorism in Bhopal, [India]. Eco-terrorism is simply the terrorizing of the environment and living things within the ecosystems under assault. Counter eco-terrorism is the neutralization of eco-terrorism. Therefore, the destruction of a whaling ship is counter-terrorism. In fact, Sea Shepherd specifically targets illegal activities and thus we are a law enforcement organization.

We operate under the principles of the UN World Charter for Nature and, under the section labeled Implementation, enforcement by nongovernmental organizations and individuals is authorized. I have used the Charter as my defense in court and was acquitted of charges in Canada in 1995 because I successfully argued that my intervention was lawful. I have been arrested numerous times but never officially convicted of a crime. I do not have a criminal record because I don't break laws, I uphold them. I do not condemn and deplore the use of violence in upholding justice. I refrain from it myself, and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society has never caused a death or even an injury in our 25-year history. I do not however sit in judgment of the actions, strategies, or tactics of others. Strength lies in diversity of approaches and I support all means of fighting to protect this planet.

I also draw a distinction between actions against property and actions against life. Violence cannot be undertaken against non-sentient objects. There is only violence against life. Destroying an object that is used to violently injure or take life is in fact an act of nonviolence.

Are you tactically and ethically opposed to the use of violence as a legitimate means of social change for the environmental and animal rights movements?

We are a violent species, and we always solve our problems with violence. There have been no exceptions. Nonviolent victories are a myth. Force has always prevailed. The independence of India was not achieved by Gandhi alone; there was a violent insurgency going on against the British at the same time. Gandhi utilized nonviolence as a tactic against the self-righteous British for the purpose of humiliating them, and it worked; where[as] it would never have worked against the Nazis or Stalin's Communist Party. Martin Luther King did not win civil rights achievements by himself, he had the help of the Black Panthers and riots in the streets.

Nonviolence works as a compliment to violent action, it has never worked by itself. Violence can only be defeated by a greater force of violence or by the strategic implementation of applied violence.

When is terrorism not terrorism? First, when you win. Once a terrorist wins and becomes a President or a Prime Minister, they are referred to as statesmen. Secondly, when you manipulate the media to justify your violence and thus justifiable violence is not considered terrorism.

Terrorism is as terrorism does. It is simply rhetoric. One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter.

You have been quoted as saying that “Sea Shepherd is the Lady of the Night of the conservation movement. Many of our allies do agree with our objectives in the daytime but they don’t want to be associated with our methods at night.” How do you deal with internal criticism from other movement figures and organizations? Do these attacks on your direct action approach to conservation hinder Sea Shepherd’s efforts?

I don’t deal with them. I find the criticisms to be irrelevant. Sea Shepherd is answerable only to our members and our clients. Our clients are the living beings in the oceans.

Shortly after the sinking of half the Icelandic whaling fleet in 1986, a former colleague of mine from Greenpeace told me that what we had done was a “cowardly, despicable, criminal, and unforgivable action.” I answered, “So what? We did not sink those ships for you or for any of the six billion hominid assholes on this planet. We sank them for the whales. Find me one whale that disagrees with the action and we will no longer do such things; but until then, we could not give a damn what human beings have to say about the actions.”

I think a good policy is to always think what the client would support. When liberating chickens, it only matters what the chickens think or feel. The feelings and thoughts of the chicken farmer, of the armchair critics, of the media, are irrelevant. Only the chickens matter, or, depending on the action, the whales, the minks, the chimps, or the trees.

Industries that profit off of animal exploitation and environmental destruction are using a post-September 11/Patriot Act political climate to encourage the state to crack down on any opposing their practices. Free Speech and activism are under attack—and earth and animal activists are at the forefront of this crackdown. How do you deal with the “terrorist” label for Sea Shepherd’s actions, and what are your thoughts on how our movements should respond, if at all, to such politically charged assaults?

The label of terrorism is simply a label. We still live in a society, at least in North America, and most places in Europe, where evidence does count for something. This could change, and if and when it does, strategy and tactics must adapt to the change. If we were a “terrorist organization” we would have been shut down by now. We have not even been questioned by U.S. authorities, so the accusations are without substance and thus of little concern.

The fact is however, that for the ecosystems of the world, for the endangered species, for all plants and animals, there are no rights. I personally cannot get overly worked up about deprivation of human rights in a world where nonhumans have no rights at all. Until animals, plants, rivers, and wetlands have rights, none of us have any rights at all because without ecosystems and without diversity, rights are meaningless.

Do you think it is too late to slow down sufficiently or stop the destruction of the planet?

We will not destroy this planet. We may be conceited but we are not as great as we would like to believe we are. The Earth will abide long after we are gone. It has survived greater pollutions than we have thrown at it. It has survived mass extinctions and it will survive us. The question is will we survive, and how many species will we drag down with us to extinction?

I personally feel that humanity is doomed. We are the last of the hominid primates, and this was a group that was never very successful to begin with—overly territorial, obsessed with trivialities, violent, petty, and completely lacking in empathy for other species. The world will be a much nicer place without us. But if we can buy time for other species and ecosystems, and if some of us can alleviate the suffering inflicted on other species, then this is a worthwhile pursuit.

Franklin Roosevelt once said (or some unknown speechwriter said it for him) “we have nothing to fear except fear itself.” There is simply nothing in this world to be afraid of. It’s a fact we are going to die. There is no way out. No one gets out alive. Without death there can be no life and without life there can be no death. It is a cycle of nature and is in accordance

with the laws of nature.

It is the fear of death that causes problems: it prevents action, causes betrayal, and creates conflict, insanity, instability, and power-mongering.

Over the years you have faced serious charges from various countries, have been arrested and imprisoned by Interpol, and at one point were looking at a life sentence in a foreign jail. What did you do psychologically to cope with such prospects, and what words of comfort can you extend to those currently serving political sentences?

Going to jail is simply the price of doing business as an activist. When Ralph Waldo Emerson asked Henry David Thoreau what he was doing in jail, Thoreau replied, "What are you doing out there?"

Jail and prison are life experiences and like any experience it can be pleasant or unpleasant, hard or easy, interesting or boring, depending on the psychology of the person imprisoned. People can adjust to any environment if required. The best thing to do is find a niche and survive and, if possible, find the means to flourish. Prison also provides insight into the state of conditions for all the animals imprisoned on farms, ranches, zoos, laboratories, game parks, and aquariums. Most of the world's citizens spend their entire life in captivity; and the death penalty is the most common sentence given to nonhumans after serving their time.

What tactical and motivational advice can you offer, from your 25 years on the frontlines, to those new activists getting involved in the fight for animal rights and the earth?

Number one, don't get caught. Number two, don't trot out the tired rhetoric of the left. People don't want to hear about capitalism and imperialism—all the talk changes nothing. The U.S. is not a capitalist country, it is corporate socialism. Calling these corporate welfare bums capitalists is complimenting them.

And put away the tired rhetoric about social justice. All people are the same. The poor are simply wannabe rich people. The oppressed are wannabe oppressors. People share the same vices and virtues regardless of class, color, sex or religion. When the holier-than-thou types fight each other, it is a distraction and changes nothing. Whites, Blacks, Indians, Asians, etc., are all the same—we are a bunch of self-centered, conceited naked apes, all divine legends in our own mind, and confused in our pathetic little primate brains about what this world is all about.

All problems are trivial compared to the one most important issue: the escalating diminishment of global biodiversity. And there is only one cause for this problem and that is out of control human population growth.

Yes, I know, there are those reading this in violent disagreement with what I have said. You are entitled to believe whatever you wish but don't expect everyone to swallow the same horseshit. The sooner people begin to think as individuals and stop following the anthropocentric Pied Piper, the better off this world will be.

And here's the bottom line. Unless you are prepared to risk your life, unless you are prepared to endure imprisonment, you have absolutely no business being an activist. This movement does not need cowards. The movement needs discipline, security, and a steadfast martial spirit. We also need to understand that we must agree to disagree. Not everyone has the same values and there are so few of us and so many in opposition to us that we need to ignore inside detractors and concentrate exclusively on the real enemy—those who are destroying life on this planet.

I have never pretended that Sea Shepherd will save the world. We are simply one small acupuncture needle in a global effort to address our greatest problems. To be successful, we need a thousand small organizations addressing hundreds of thousands of issues. Strength is to be found in diversity of approaches and a diversity of ideas, tactics, actions, and philosophies.

This is an edited reprinted from the Spring 2003 issue of Bite Back magazine (www.directaction.info). Contact Bite Back for a free copy of the magazine. Reprinted with kind permission. To learn more about the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society or to volunteer for campaigns, visit www.seashepherd.org.

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