

Whale Wars

How TV Turns Violent Green Activists into Popular Entertainment

By David Hogberg

Summary: *Whale Wars* is a popular Friday night television series on the Animal Planet cable channel. Having just completed its fourth season, the hour-long documentary program depicts the heroism of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society as it tries to stop Japanese fishing vessels from killing whales in Antarctica. Too bad that *Whale Wars* omits important information about the extremist nature of Sea Shepherd and its operations.

In November 2008 a television documentary program called *Whale Wars* premiered on the Animal Planet cable channel. The program follows a group of self-proclaimed “eco-pirates” called Sea Shepherd as they try to prevent Japanese government-authorized fishing vessels from hunting whales in the waters off Antarctica. (The program is available on DVD and many episodes can be viewed online.)

Upon locating Japanese whalers, Sea Shepherd activists have thrown bottles of butyric acid and packages of methyl cellulose onto the Japanese ships’ decks. The first can sicken humans and taint whale meat, while the second makes ship decks dangerously slippery. From onboard their own vessels, Sea Shepherd’s crew have also thrown large ropes into the sea, attempting to entangle them in the whalers’ propellers. The Japanese ships fight back with water



Paul Watson and the crew of the *Steve Irwin*

cannons, flash grenades and pain-inducing LRAD (long-range acoustic devices).

The TV series shows a Sea Shepherd vessel named the *Steve Irwin* (after the late host of *Crocodile Hunter*, a wildlife documentary series) as it tracks down three Japanese harpoon ships named *Yushin Maru* and a large factory ship, the *Nisshin Maru*, that processes the harpoon ships’ catch. Later in the series Sea Shepherd acquires a more powerful ship, an icebreaker it calls the *Bob Barker*, named after the host of the TV game show *The Price Is Right*. Barker contributed \$5 million to Sea Shepherd to assist its mission.

Each whaling (and television) season Sea Shepherd deploys its flotilla as the Japanese whalers try to meet a kill-quota of 950 minke whales, 50 fin whales, and 50 humpback whales. This quota violates a ruling by the International Whaling Commission (IWC), which has banned commercial whaling since 1986. Three

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countries, however —Japan, Norway and Iceland — defy the IWC ban. The Japanese pretend their whaling operations are permitted because the IWC allows whaling for scientific purposes and the whalers are sponsored by the Japanese government's Institute of Cetacean Research. But this claim is dubious since whale meat often ends up in Japan's food markets.

For four years *Whale Wars* has depicted a David vs. Goliath struggle of feisty eco-warriors harassing relentless Japanese whalers. At the start of each television season the principal goal of Sea Shepherd is to locate the evasive *Nisshin Maru* and block the spillway at its stern to prevent the harpoon ships from off-loading their kills onto the factory ship. There can be no whaling if the whales can't be processed and their meat refrigerated at sea.

While *Whale Wars* reveals much about the pitched battles between Sea Shepherd and the Japanese whalers, unfortunately it omits a great deal of crucial information about Sea Shepherd's violent and radical nature. In so doing, the show makes a fringe "environmental" group seem reasonable and heroic.

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Terrorists or Activists?

Whale Wars has been a hit show for Animal Planet, one of thirteen channels operated by a division of Discovery Communications, Inc. (DCI), the giant publicly-owned media company based in Silver Spring, Maryland (2010 revenue: \$3.8 billion). The Animal Planet channel is available in 70 countries and claims viewership of 97 million U.S. households.

Animal Planet and DCI obviously embrace *Whale Wars* for its entertainment value and audience share. The show's producers want viewers to see a story of high seas adventure, one that portrays a struggle pitting dedicated activists against an outlaw nation engaged in barbaric practices. But that is not the reality of Sea Shepherd, the program's heroes. The organization, which is recognized as a 501(c)(3) public charity by the IRS, is dedicated to destroying modern industrial society.

For example, in his book *Earthforce! An Earth Warrior's Guide To Strategy*, Paul Watson, the head of Sea Shepherd, claims that humans must live in harmony with nature, and that the only people who do so are small tribes that live in Africa and Asia. Peter Hammarstedt, a Sea Shepherd first mate, has described what the group wants to achieve:

"If regular Americans and people around the world realize it's wrong to kill a whale, and right to go to all kinds of lengths short of hurting anybody to stop it, then we are one step closer to people questioning why they use animals for food, why they use animals for clothes, and why they use animals for medical research...We are winning...We will see the end of factory farming, we will see the end of fur farming in North America."

Underlying such sentiment is an anti-human ideology. At an "Animal Rights 2002" conference Watson said, "There are 30-million plus species on this planet. They're all earthlings. They're all equal. Some are more 'equal' than others, I admit: earthworms are far more valuable than people." And in *Earthforce!* Watson writes that while "humans may consider themselves to be divine legends in their own mind, the biological reality is that they are simply overly glorified, conceited apes." Yet these particular views are never mentioned on *Whale Wars*.

Sea Shepherd's History of Violent "Direct Action"

Sea Shepherd founder Paul Watson uses the euphemism "direct action" to describe his group's reliance on violent tactics. At a 2002 animal rights conference, Watson explained, "The fact is that we live in an extremely violent culture, and we all justify violence if it's for what we believe in." He added: "There's nothing wrong with being a terrorist, as long as you win. Then you write the history."

Under Watson's leadership, Sea Shepherd has a long history of violent "direct action." Over more than three decades Sea Shepherd claims to have attacked whaling ships around the world and to have sunk ten of them. *Sierra, Susan, Theresa, Isba 1, Isba 2, Hvalur 6, Hvalur 7, Senet, Nybrena, and Morild*—their names are painted on the port side of the *Steve Irwin*.

In 1979 Watson and his crew rammed the *Sierra* with their vessel, the *Sea Shepherd*. The *Sierra* did not sink but managed to make it back to a port in Portugal. However, there was an anonymous follow-up. According to *Earth Warrior*, a 1995 book about Sea Shepherd by author David Morris, Watson received word that "three environmentalists in wetsuits, carrying

magnetic explosive mines, had just slipped into Lisbon harbor and blown up the *Sierra*.” At the time Watson was about to go on trial in Quebec for assaulting a police officer during the course of a protest against a Canadian seal hunt.

Watson takes liberties with his criminal record, claiming that no Sea Shepherd mission has resulted “in a single criminal or civil conviction against myself.” His convictions for interfering with the seal hunt in Canada in 1980 and 1983 were overturned on appeal. In 1993, Watson was arrested in Canada for Sea Shepherd actions against Cuban and Spanish fishing boats off the coast of Newfoundland. In 1997 he was convicted in absentia in Norway for the sinking of a Norwegian whaling ship, the *Nybrena*. Watson has claimed responsibility for disabling several ships in Iceland. And authorities in Costa Rica and Japan have also attempted to arrest Watson for sabotage activities there. None of these run-ins with the law are mentioned on *Whale Wars*.

Morris’s book *Earth Warrior* describes a frightening incident in which Watson told his crew member Peter Brown to shoot at a Japanese drift-netting ship, the *Gen Ei Maru No. 79*. “Peter runs below deck and returns holding an AK-47 semiautomatic rifle,” wrote Morris. “Shots from the armor piercing rifle blast through the engine noise...Peter is apparently shooting at the bow, aiming below the waterline, where it’s mostly storage space. But who knows for sure? Paul orders Peter to fire across the bow. Shots blast out again. Peter is now holding a shotgun. Where did that come from? Then back to the AK-47. He flatly refuses an order to shoot out the spotlight on the *Gen Ei Maru No. 79*. ‘It’s too close to the bridge,’ he protests.” Morris reports that Watson subsequently dropped the shotgun into the ocean and that Peter Brown would say the shotgun was loaded

with harmless “crackers.” But then why was he ordered to shoot out a spotlight? This incident is never mentioned on *Whale Wars*.

Watson seems quite capable of lying to his crew and Sea Shepherd supporters when it serves his purposes. For instance, near the end of the first season there is a confrontation between the Sea Shepherd vessel *Steve Irwin* and the whaler *Nishin Maru*. In the episode Watson opens his jacket to reveal a slug lodged in his bullet-proof vest. He later issues a press statement claiming he’s been shot at from the *Nishin Maru*, an allegation hotly denied by the Japanese crew. The claim seems unlikely and, given Watson’s own views on truth and deception, appears suspect. Indeed, the incident was too far-fetched for the producers of *Whale Wars* who added a response from the Japanese. They argued that Watson would have been thrown backward on impact and sustained bruises to his chest had someone from their ship shot at him. *Whale Wars* footage shows that neither occurred.

In another incident in season two, the *Steve Irwin* is shown refueling in port. As Watson speaks to a gaggle of reporters, a crew member hands him an envelope that Watson opens in full view of the cameras. A white powder is inside. Authorities are called and Watson and other crew members are quarantined on the *Steve Irwin* until it is determined that the powder is not a threat. This incident generated considerable sympathetic media coverage for Sea Shepherd.

But some aspects of the incident make it highly suspicious. First, why would a crew member hand Watson an envelope while he was talking to reporters? Presumably it would make more sense to wait until Watson was finished with his interviews. Next, presumably someone as busy as

Watson would have an administrative assistant who opens his mail for him. The envelope with the white powder should have been opened long before it reached Watson. Nevertheless, none of these odd coincidences are examined in the show. Neither Sea Shepherd nor Animal Planet agreed to requests for an interview regarding this matter.

Sea Shepherd Origins and Funding

A longtime environmental activist, Sea Shepherd founder Paul Watson’s public persona belies his group’s history of violence. He does not act like a belligerent radical, but is soft-spoken and seems reasonable and likeable. But in his book *Earthforce!*, Watson explains that to persuade the public (and manipulate the media) activists should not “alienate... by dressing and behaving in a manner which threaten the moral majority....When preaching to the Romans, it pays to look and behave like a Roman. People distrust, dislike, and often detest those who appear different.”

A look at Watson’s personal history provides evidence of his belligerent character. Watson has claimed to be a founder of Greenpeace, but was expelled from its board of directors in 1977 (by a vote of 11 to one) because his fellow directors considered him divisive and irresponsible. In 2003 he was elected to the Sierra Club board as leader of a faction that favored strict controls on immigration to prevent U.S. population increases. He quit the following year to protest the Club’s support for hunting.

After leaving Greenpeace, Watson went on to start the Earth Force Society, convincing writer Cleveland Amory, then president of the British Fund for Animals, to support Earth Force’s first ship, which Watson named *Sea Shepherd*. In 1981 Watson

changed his group's name to Sea Shepherd Conservation Society.

With its propensity for violence, Sea Shepherd was a low-budget operation—until *Whale Wars*. Tax documents show its revenue jumped from \$1.5 million in 2005 to \$3.4 million in 2007 to \$4.0 million in 2008. IRS data for 2009, the most recent available, show Sea Shepherd revenue of \$9.8 million, which includes the \$5 million gift from game show host Bob Barker that was used to buy a second ship named in gratitude after him.

Other public records show that in 2010 Bob Barker's DJ and T Foundation (assets: \$13.3 million), a grant-maker dedicated to spaying and neutering animals, made seven gifts to Sea Shepherd totaling \$3.7 million. There are also contributions from the Tides Foundation (\$30,500 since 2002), the Foundation for Deep Ecology (\$281,000 since 2000), and the Park Foundation, Inc. (\$159,000 since 1999). Sea Shepherd's latest tax return shows that Watson is paid just over \$100,000 in salary and benefits. Most activists in the organization, including the crews sailing to the Antarctic, are volunteers.

Rotten-Butter Bombs

Butyric acid is a substance that is found in trace amounts in foods like butter and parmesan cheese. In its concentrated form, it has an intensely foul, vomit-like odor. Sea Shepherd keeps butyric acid in small, brown bottles that, when thrown on the deck of a whaling ship shatter, spilling the acid. Sea Shepherd activists hope to make the deck of the whaling ship nearly impossible for the Japanese crew to work on, as the foul odor can linger for days. They also hope the acid comes into contact with the whale meat, which will spoil it.

The show repeatedly refers to butyric acid as “non-toxic.” Sea Shepherd volunteer Benjamin Potts says the butyric acid is “not really dangerous but it does stink a lot.” Watson says, “I delivered what I call the first organic, biodegradable, non-toxic delivery of chemical warfare ever when we hit them with rotten-butter bombs and methyl cellulose.”

Butyric acid is actually more toxic than *Whale Wars* and Sea Shepherd let on. Many chemical companies that produce it list it as a flammable. Thus, throwing it on the deck of ship is a potential fire hazard. It is also hazardous if it comes into contact with the skin or eyes, or if its fumes are inhaled. Inhalation can cause severe irritation of the respiratory tract, possibly requiring medical attention. Sea Shepherd is exposing the Japanese crew to these hazards. At various points in the show, Sea Shepherd crew members insist they are careful not to throw the bottles directly at Japanese crew members. But only so much care can be exercise when a bottle is thrown from one moving ship to another on often rough seas.

What is one to make of Watson's claim that such tactics are not violent? “What we do is aggressive non-violence,” he says. According to Morris's *Earth Warrior*, Watson does not believe that “destruction of inanimate objects is violence.” Violence, Watson says, “is an action force directed against a living, sentient creature, and so ramming a ship doesn't count as violence.” If it's not violent to deliberately ram a ship, what about causing the ship's crew members to fear for their lives? Does Sea Shepherd deny responsibility when its members throw methyl cellulose onto a whaler's wet deck so its crew fears slipping and falling?

In a statement posted on the organization's website, Greenpeace, Watson's old

organization, condemns Sea Shepherd in just these terms:

“We differ with Paul Watson on what constitutes violence. He states that nobody has ever been harmed by a Sea Shepherd action. But the test of non-violence is the nature of your action, not whether harm results or not. There are many acts of violence—for example, holding a gun to someone's head—which result in no harm. That doesn't change their nature. We believe that throwing butyric acid at the whalers, dropping cables to foul their props, and threatening to ram them in the freezing waters of the Antarctic constitutes violence because of the potential consequences. The fact that the consequences have not been realized is irrelevant.”

Deception and Trouble in Paradise

Watson's willingness to deceive is never explored on *Whale Wars*, despite that fact that it is a significant part of his strategy. “Deception is a weapon,” Watson counsels in *Earthforce!* “Your worldly mind will understand the justification for deception in the presentation of your arguments. Your universal mind, the real you, can remain at peace with the knowledge that your deception has only served to deceive your enemies and not yourself.” Yet Watson is willing to deceive more than just his enemies. “If you do not know an answer, a fact, or a statistic, then simply...make it up on the spot and deliver the information confidently and without hesitation,” he writes.

Watson's deception was on full display in the aftermath of an incident that occurred during the third season of *Whale Wars* programming (June-September, 2010). The show told the story of the Sea Shepherd vessel *Ady Gil*, a 78 foot wave-piercing timaran, an ocean-worthy speedboat named after its owner, a California

businessman who made his fortune in digital technology. Gil loaned his boat to Sea Shepherd because it was capable of speeds much faster than any Japanese whaling ship.

The *Ady Gil* was captained by Pete Bethune, who planned to use it as a stealth vessel to disrupt whaling operations. One of his tactics included the use of a bow and arrows. Bethune was filmed on the show explaining, “The idea is if there is a dead whale in the water being pulled into one of the harpoon vessels, we shoot a couple of arrows into it. And then we notify them and say, hey, the whale is still perfectly fine for research but you may not want to eat it.”

The *Ady Gil*'s time on *Whale Wars* was short-lived. In episode six of the fourteen-episode program a harpoon ship cut through the speedboat, shearing off ten feet of its bow. Authorities couldn't decide whether the collision was accidental or deliberate. The *Bob Barker* rescued the crew and tried to tow the *Ady Gil* to a French research station in Antarctica, but the speedboat took on water and a decision was made to let it sink. A few days later, Bethune secretly boarded the harpoon ship, planning to confront its captain. The ship's crew took him into custody and returned to Japan where Bethune spent the next five months in prison awaiting trial. A Japanese court gave him a suspended sentence and he returned home to New Zealand.

At the start of season four, shown in June 2011, Sea Shepherd acquired a new speedboat, the *Brigitte Bardot* (named after the film star-turned-animal rights activist) and a new captain, Lockhart Maclean. Bethune went unmentioned. Why? Bethune and Watson had had a falling out. In June 2010, Sea Shepherd effectively expelled Bethune. In mid-September

2010, Animal Planet ran a special episode of *Whale Wars* chronicling Bethune's ordeal in Japan. In it, Watson claimed that the reason Sea Shepherd expelled Bethune was to placate the Japanese judges who held Bethune's fate in their hands. Missing from the show is any mention of the press release Sea Shepherd issued expelling Bethune. Titled “Remaining Aggressive and Nonviolent,” Sea Shepherd claimed that the “bow and arrows revealed to be on the Sea Shepherd vessel *Ady Gil*, and in the possession of Captain Bethune on that ship, are absolutely not in line with Sea Shepherd's policy” of aggressive but nonviolent direct action. As a result Bethune would “no longer be formally associated with” Sea Shepherd.

In October, Bethune responded by posting a “letter of resignation” on his Facebook page. “When I met with Paul Watson in July 2009,” Bethune wrote, “he gave me permission to take a Bow and Arrow to Antarctica, with the idea of pasting a poison on the arrow tips...and firing them into dead whales while they were being transferred from harpoon vessel to processing ship.”

Bethune claims that after the *Ady Gil* was scuttled the Japanese crew found the arrows floating in the water and tried to use them for propaganda purposes by posting pictures of the arrows on Institute of Cetacean Research's website. Sea Shepherd responded with a statement claiming that the Japanese had planted the arrows. The Japanese have “pictures of a bow with arrows floating near the submerged hulk of the *Ady Gil*,” Watson said in the press release. “I suppose the only reason for this is that guns don't float and [they] needed a ‘smoking gun’ but had to settle for a ‘floating arrow’.” According to Bethune, it was only when Watson learned that *Whale Wars* camera footage would show him holding the arrows that it

decided to accuse Bethune of violating Sea Shepherd “policy.”

Watson claimed to be blind-sided by Bethune's plan to use poisoned arrows. But how is that different from ramming ships and throwing butyric acid on their decks? Indeed, shooting a poison-tipped arrow into a dead whale is consistent with Watson's notion of “aggressive but nonviolent action.”

Conclusion

By mainstreaming radicalism, *Whale Wars* has made the violent tactics of Sea Shepherd widely acceptable. As Sea Shepherd goes mainstream, it's likely that more advocacy groups and their leaders will be tempted to do likewise knowing that they will not endanger their tax-exempt status or their capacity to raise money. Their targets will become less objectionable than Japanese whalers. It may be only a matter of time before activists use Sea Shepherd's “non-violent” violence against the producers of beef and pork, chicken and turkey—all staples of the Western diet.

Thus far violence in the environmental movement has for the most part been limited to fringe groups like Sea Shepherd. Discovery Communications' *Whale Wars* runs the risk of spreading that violence far and wide.

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GreenNotes

How effective has Big Green's war on prosperity actually been? Sadly, very effective. A new study by the **National Mining Association** (NMA) claims that the **Sierra Club's** "Beyond Coal" campaign alone, which aims to shutter coal-fired power plants across the country, has led to the destruction of an estimated 1.24 million jobs in 36 states. According to an NMA press release, "The destructive impact of the 'Beyond Coal' campaign is most clearly evident in the following 10 states where power plants blocked by the club represent the highest number of potential jobs (construction and permanent) foregone: Illinois (126,612), Texas (122,065), Montana (114,102), Nevada (75,194), Florida (75,055), Ohio (70,371), Colorado (55,620), Michigan (53,587), Oklahoma (42,581) and Kentucky (38,824)."

The solar energy company **Solyndra** was once a centerpiece of President **Barack Obama's** green jobs initiative; in fact, the President visited the Solyndra plant only last year to tout the company's half billion dollar loan from the federal government. But now the company is going under, and all those tax dollars seem to have vanished, the latest in a long stream of government-funded, green jobs debacles. But there may be something more sinister afoot than mere poor management: Solyndra corporate offices have been raided by the F.B.I, and the once-trendy company is also now under Congressional investigation. Rightly so: As the editors of the *Washington Examiner* put it, "The Taxpayers deserve to know how and why Obama wasted their money on Solyndra. They deserve to know whether it has anything to do with the fact that **George Kaiser**, a major Obama bundler, was the company's largest corporate investor. They need to know whether that has anything to do with the extraordinary agreement the **Energy Department** made, allowing private investors like Kaiser to be made whole before the government in the event of bankruptcy." Indeed.

Yet another blow to the man-made global warming hypothesis: In August, the world's most prestigious scientific journal *Nature* published research potentially vindicating an old theory that the interaction of cosmic rays and the sun's magnetic field may contribute to Earth's constantly changing climate: "It sounds like a conspiracy theory: 'cosmic rays' from deep space might be creating clouds in Earth's atmosphere and changing the climate. Yet an experiment at **CERN**, Europe's high-energy physics laboratory near Geneva, Switzerland, is finding tentative evidence for just that," reports *Nature News* (August 24th).

Green groups will not stop until we're paying more for everything, it seems, even bridges. This summer, the **National Wildlife Refuge Association** and **Defenders of Wildlife**, represented by the **Southern Environmental Law Center**, filed a lawsuit in federal court to stop the badly-needed replacement for the 2.7 mile Bonner Bridge, which connects Hatteras Island and the rest of North Carolina's Outer Banks. Instead, the greens want a bridge that would bypass the **Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge**. The problem? That would make the bridge some 17 miles long and vastly more expensive. According to the *Associated Press*: "State officials have said the environmentalists' preferred plan for a new bridge is less feasible for several reasons, including cost. The 17-mile bridge would cost around \$1 billion, roughly five times the amount of the current contract."

President Obama has wisely stepped in to stop his own job-killing **Environmental Protection Agency** (EPA) - for once. On September 2nd, Obama directed EPA administrator Lisa Jackson to withdraw the agency's controversial plans to tighten rules on smog emissions, which would have cost the economy an estimated \$19-90 billion. "The president's decision is good news for the economy and Americans looking for work. EPA's proposal would have prevented the very job creation that President Obama has identified as his top priority," cheered **Jack Gerard**, CEO of the **American Petroleum Institute**. Doubtless, many companies and job creators are heartened by the President's unexpected move.