

# Interview with Captain Paul Watson

## About the interviewee

Captain Paul Watson is a Canadian marine conservation activist, who founded the direct-action group Sea Shepherd in 1977. He has been described as “the world’s most aggressive, most determined, most active and most effective defender of wildlife.”

## About the questions

The questions were posed by the Journal’s editorial team.

## Citation

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## Keywords

Conservation; direct action; protected areas

**Q:** What keeps you going? Is it hope, is it uncertainty, or is it courage (or is it perhaps sheer bloody-mindedness)? Or is it a matter of concentrating on our amazing fellow-creatures and their desperate circumstances?

**A:** In 1973 I was a medic for the American Indian Movement (AIM) during the occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota. We were hopelessly outnumbered and surrounded, and the Federal agents were firing thousands of rounds into the village every night. There was zero possibility of us winning. I went to AIM leader Russell Means and I asked him why we were continuing to resist because we could not possibly win. His answer stayed with me the rest of my life. He said, “we are not concerned about winning or losing. We are not concerned about the overwhelming odds against us. We are here taking a stand because it is the right thing to do and the right place to do it.” An expression that sums it up is *Hoka hey* – taken by many as meaning “it’s a good day to die!” in the Lakota language. We must be prepared to take a stand in the present to make it a better world for tomorrow. I am always optimistic because I believe that the answer to a seemingly impossible problem is to find an impossible solution and I believe that imagination and courage driven by passion is the path to finding impossible solutions.

**Q:** Do you see any or much hope for an ecologically viable Earth, including the oceans and their life?

**A:** We either learn to live in harmony with other species by living in accordance with the basic laws of ecology or we go extinct. The

laws are diversity, interdependence and finite resources. If we continue to steal carrying capacity from other species, we will diminish both diversity and interdependence and our life support systems will crash.

**Q:** In a related fashion, do you see an ecocentrically viable way forward for humans to take collectively? If so, what does it look like? And how could we try to promote it? To put it another way, is there a path forwards (or back) that leads to life, rather than our current death spiral?

**A:** We must save our primary life support system, the ocean. To do that we need to give the ocean time to repair itself and that means a moratorium on all commercial exploitation of the sea for at least 50 years. We can take a lesson from the Polynesians, who declared areas *kapu* for 20–30 years. Bays were declared to be off limits for fishing to allow the ecosystems to recover. The penalty for breaking *kapu* was death because they knew that if the fish died, they would die also. There are no *kapu* areas in the world today. Phytoplankton populations have been diminished by 40% since 1950. No phytoplankton means diminished oxygen and that means mass extinction. My guiding slogan is a simple one: if the ocean dies, we all die.

**Q:** How do you respond to the charge that has been put against you of misanthropy? [The Editors note how unjust it is in this case.]

**A:** I am a biocentric. I view humanity as part of the diversity of life. We are not, have never been, nor can we ever be dominant over other life forms.

Plankton, worms, trees, fish and bees are more important than humans for the very simple reason that we cannot live in a world without them but they can live quite successfully without us. We need them and they don't need us and that is a fact. I do not view humans as more important than other species. People may call it 'misanthropy' if that is what they are inclined to do and that does not bother me because I expect such distractions and reactions from anthropocentric minds.

**Q: A commitment to the integrity of the Earth and its ecosystemic health can clash with a commitment to saving the lives of individual creatures. This happens most obviously in cases such as invasive species on islands, but an overriding concern with the former could also be seen as taking time and energy away from the latter. Do you see this contradiction – or at least, difference in emphasis – as a problem? If so, how could it be resolved or at least reduced in practice?**

**A:** As an ecologist, I understand that the rights of a species to survive take priority over the rights of exotic individuals or individuals that threaten the survival of indigenous species. If exotics can be captured and relocated that is best, and, if not, they should be removed

as humanely as possible. If it is a choice between the survival of Galapagos tortoises and introduced goats, the goats should be removed by capture or lethal means. Of course the ultimate exotic is humanity and I do support setting aside large tracts of wilderness as human no-go areas.

**Q: What advice do you have for other ecological activists and campaigners?**

**A:** Be passionate and let loose your imagination and have the courage to do so. Don't be discouraged by negativity or criticisms. Be respectful of diversity within social movements. There are many approaches – litigation, legislation, education or direct action. Each approach should complement the other approaches.

**Q: How can *The Ecological Citizen* and its readers support your work?**

**A:** We have the largest non-governmental navy on the planet and these ships are expensive. We need contributions, we need volunteers both on the ships and on shore, and we need the skills, abilities and commitment of people around the globe in this great endeavour to save humanity from ourselves. ■

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