

Neptune's Navy: A global initiative

Marine conservationists have most of the laws, treaties and regulations needed to protect and defend oceanic ecosystems and aquatic biodiversity. The ongoing problem, however, has been a lack of both political will and economic motivation to uphold these laws. I established the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society in 1977 as an anti-poaching, interventionist, non-government organization to act when and where governments refused to uphold their responsibilities under these laws.

Sea Shepherd has been effective in many ways over the years, especially in stopping illegal whaling operations. However, our effectiveness was often misrepresented as vigilantism and we have frequently been labelled 'pirates' (e.g., see Yuhas [2013]) despite the fact that we were opposing and shutting down *illegal* operations. In response to the criticism, I embraced the pirate image for the simple reason that pirates get things done, unencumbered by bureaucratic red tape – that and the fact that young people love the image.

In 1999 Sea Shepherd began an initiative that had not been attempted before, an initiative that has evolved into something highly effective. With Sea Shepherd we had the passion, the courage and the imagination of volunteers from around the world. What we lacked was authority. This changed when we officially partnered with the Galapagos National Park and the government of Ecuador with a program to patrol and defend the Galapagos Marine Reserve. Over the last eighteen years, Sea Shepherd has provided boats, volunteers, lawyers and technology in a partnership with the park rangers. We have trained and deployed a canine unit to detect shark fins and other wildlife species. We

also installed an automatic identification system to monitor all marine traffic in the Galapagos Marine Reserve. This partnership has yielded numerous arrests and boat seizures and, most importantly, has served as a substantial deterrent to poaching.

Using our partnership with Ecuador as a model, Sea Shepherd today has official partnerships with a number of nations including, in Africa, São Tomé and Príncipe, Gabon, Liberia and Tanzania – as well as with Mexico and Peru. For the past four years, for example, our Operation Milagro campaign in the Mexican Sea of Cortez has prevented the extinction of the highly endangered Vaquita porpoise with over 650 illegal poaching nets located and confiscated. It has been a dangerous campaign. We have had three drones shot down and our crew have been fired upon despite having armed Mexican military onboard. We will be returning once again, for our fifth year of patrols in November 2018. In Peru in 2018, Sea Shepherd will be patrolling offshore to observe and report on the activities of the Chinese anchovy fleets.

Over the last three years, Sea Shepherd has had numerous victories on the high seas. With our ships *Bob Barker* and *Steve Irwin*, we shut down the Southern Ocean toothfish poaching fleet. This campaign saw the longest pursuit of a poaching vessel in maritime history with the 110-day chase of the outlaw vessel *Thunder* (Ross and Arnold, 2018). This chase ended with the captain of the *Thunder* scuttling his own ship in an unsuccessful attempt to destroy the evidence of his illegal fishing operations – unsuccessful because a Sea Shepherd crew boarded the sinking ship to collect that evidence. This brave

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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.”

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act assisted the São Tomé and Príncipe court in sentencing the captain of the *Thunder* to three years in prison and fining the company seventeen million euros. This campaign also allowed us to pull, confiscate and destroy some 72 kilometres (70 tons) of illegal gill net.

Other recent victories include the Sea Shepherd ship *Steve Irwin* catching and chasing a Chinese fleet using illegal drift nets back to China, where the ships were arrested and fined by Chinese authorities (Heaver, 2016). And, in 2017, the Sea Shepherd ship *Ocean Warrior* assisted the East Timor authorities in the arrest and detention of fifteen Chinese vessels caught in the act of illegally fishing (BBC, 2017). Sea Shepherd anti-poaching patrols have also been working successfully to protect sea-turtle nests in Barbuda, Costa Rica, Guatemala and the Indian Ocean island of Mayotte.

Sea Shepherd is also partnered with Parley for the Oceans to address the great threat of plastic pollution in the sea (<http://www.parley.tv/#fortheoceans>). Every year Sea Shepherd chapters sponsor beach clean-ups worldwide to remove thousands of tons of plastic debris from the oceans.

Our partnership programmes have been enormously successful and Sea Shepherd now hosts the largest non-governmental navy in the world. We have fourteen ships deployed around the globe – with the *Ocean Warrior* patrolling off East Africa; the *Bob Barker* and the *Sam Simon* patrolling off West Africa; the *Steve Irwin* off Australia's Great Barrier Reef; the *Martin Sheen* doing research in the waters of British Columbia; the *Brigitte Bardot* patrolling offshore of

Peru; the *Santa Andrea* in the Gulf of Maine; the *Emmanuel Bronner* in the Baltic Sea; the *White Holly* being prepared for Caribbean patrols; the *Alchemy* in the waters off California; the *Farley Mowat* and *Sharpie* working with the Mexican government; the *John Paul DeJoria* patrolling the Caribbean; and the *Jules Verne* in the Coral Sea.

But as important and as useful as our ships are, the real strength of Sea Shepherd lies in our global network of volunteers. At any given moment there are some 200 people, from over three dozen nations, crewing the ships. In addition, there are many hundreds of shore volunteers working to help to finance and supply these ships. It is the passion, the courage, the resolve, the resourcefulness and the imagination of these dedicated volunteers that drive our successful campaigns. The simple fact is that I could not pay professionals to do what these incredibly devoted volunteers do for no pay, with their only reward being the satisfaction of saving aquatic lives and protecting the integrity of threatened ecosystems. ■

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