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A tale of two ships

It's an epic battle being fought out across thousands of miles of empty ocean, with just two boats struggling to stop Japan's whaling expedition in the Antarctic. Trouble is, one belongs to Greenpeace and the other to Sea Shepherd, rival organisations that are as likely to fight each other as the whalers they are hunting down. John Vidal reports

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Greenpeace vessel the MY Esperanza, which is back in the Southern Ocean this year to protect the whales against the Japanese whaling fleet. Photograph: Greenpeace/Jiri Rezac

Yesterday evening a nautical drama was being played out between seven ships deep in the heaving, wild and normally extremely lonely Southern Ocean on the edge of Antarctica. The Nisshin Maru, a large Japanese whaling factory ship, was steaming due south at 15 knots in heavy seas with a crew of 80 and with the carcasses of possibly 50 whales aboard.

Two miles behind it, in full sight but not in radio contact, was the Esperanza, a Greenpeace vessel converted from a Russian navy fire-fighting

ship with a volunteer crew of 21 nationalities and a Dutch captain. The Esperanza is well equipped, as you would expect from a large and well-resourced operation with more than 200,000 members, but it looks tiny beside the vast whaling vessel.

Steaming towards both ships, and due to meet them in possibly a day or two among the icebergs and the fogs, is the MV Steve Irwin, the black-painted flagship of Captain Paul Watson and the California-based Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, the world's most uncompromising environmental enforcement group. His crew is smaller, but - like that of the Esperanza - made up of brilliant and committed seamen. Discipline is everything at sea and both sets of volunteers, male and female and drawn from just about every country, respond magnificently to the challenge and the danger.

Yesterday afternoon the MV Steve Irwin was 60S 78E, roughly 2,500 miles south-west of Fremantle in Australia, pursuing a group of four small whaling ships that the Japanese are this year using to kill nearly 1,000 whales in the Antarctic whale sanctuary. This little taskforce is thought to be heading towards an as yet unknown rendezvous with both the Nisshin Maru and a supply vessel to offload any whales they may have harpooned and pick up stores.

But the chase is in particular earnest because one of these smaller whalers, the Yusshin Maru No 2, has already clashed with the Irwin and is now running from it with two of the Sea Shepherd boat's crew. In an act of extraordinary courage - or stupidity - Giles Lane from Brighton and Benjamin Potts from Australia leapt aboard the Yusshin Maru No 2 from the Irwin to deliver a letter to the Japanese captain requesting him to leave the whale sanctuary. The Japanese, not believing their luck, promptly held them captive and sped over the horizon. Now there is an international diplomatic incident, with the Japanese saying they will only hand them back if Sea Shepherd agrees to certain demands, and Watson saying this is "an illegal act of hostage-taking".

"Using hostages to make demands is the hallmark of terrorism and Sea Shepherd has no interest in negotiating with terrorist groups," said the man who has himself been called a terrorist many times by the Japanese.

Either way, the drama is reaching its climax. It is likely that in the next 48 hours all seven ships will meet in icy seas and there will ensue a dangerous sea battle the like of which has not been seen since - well, the last time all these characters met in the Antarctic, almost a year ago.

Then, there was an international incident and very nearly several disasters. Over a period of more than a week, acid and mud, as well as water cannons and nail guns, were used. There were collisions, shouting matches and three distress flares had to be launched - first by Sea Shepherd when one of its dinghies got separated and its crew was stranded on an ice floe, then by one of the Japanese ships when it was rammed by the Sea Shepherd ship the Robert Hunter, and lastly by the Nisshin Maru again when it caught fire and one man died (it has since been completely refurbished). As is

customary at sea, everyone left off fighting each other to help those in distress.

This time, the environmentalists are aware they could be sailing in to a carefully laid trap set by the Japanese fleet, which is clearly intending to regroup and draw in its hunters. Little else would explain the tactics of the mothership which, having sailed 800 miles north out of the whaling grounds, has now turned round and is steaming back at full speed, possibly to draw Greenpeace away from the whalers and to leave their ship dangerously low on fuel.

"Anything could happen", said Greenpeace's Dave Walsh, on board the Esperanza last night. "We do not know what we are going down to, or what will happen."

In Watson's view the Japanese are now "acting irrationally" and potentially dangerously. "Something's definitely going to happen," he said by satellite phone yesterday. "Two years ago, we chased the whalers for 3,000km along this remote Antarctic coast. We will continue to pursue them for as long as it takes. The oceans are being pillaged and destroyed and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society is the only organisation out on the high seas trying to do something about it."

As Watson's remarks show, there is far more at stake than a chase. Sea Shepherd and Greenpeace might both be pursuing the same whaling ships, but at play in the southern ocean are large egos, corporate pride, old jealousies, intense rivalries, distrust and fundamental differences of opinion about the environment, protest and confrontation. While the crews undoubtedly have deep respect for each other in such dangerous conditions, they are in official or semi-official conflict.

I have sailed with both Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd, and the two organisations are as different as chalk and cheese. The tactics they use are different. Sea Shepherd thinks nothing of chucking acid, stink bombs, urine or even chocolate cake at its adversaries. It will try to foul ships by putting ropes round their propellers and, led by Watson, the crew has crept on to its enemies' boats at night and opened the stopcocks to sink them. Greenpeace's main tactic is to put itself between the whales and the whalers, or in the paths of survey ships - not safe, but highly effective. Its rule is non-violent direct action.

The real difference, though, is in the captains. Greenpeace has used many, but Sea Shepherd is synonymous with Watson, a veritable force of nature. His seamanship is legendary and his commitment to the marine environment complete - to the point where he now holds the human world in contempt.

Recently he was described in the New Yorker as a Captain Nemo figure: "Nemo understood that it did not matter what humans think because humanity was the problem. Nemo had no use for society's rules, morality and judgments. His duty was to save life in the sea from the greed of mankind. I understand that philosophy and I have lived it every day of my adult life," he said.

It sounds - and is - extreme, but in person Watson is one of the best companions imaginable, eager to talk about everything from religion to philosophy. He quotes films, reads widely, writes poetry and books, laughs a lot, and teaches ecology and ethics at Californian universities. He is what he would call a "biocentrist", someone who believes that the life of a whale or any other wild animal is of equal value to that of a human. He describes himself as a "humble fanatic", who deeply loves the freedom of the seas and the solitude, and whose greatest pleasure is to "swim at night alone in the deep, living oceans".

On board, though, he runs his ship like a dictator. When I sailed with him, the crew lived in awe of a man who accepted no "consensus shit", abided no drugs or "friggin' in the riggin'", took no advice, and gave no clues to his plans. He told me he acted by a martial code culled from the methods of ancient eastern and modern western warfare and expected to die for his cause.

Crucially, Watson co-founded both Greenpeace and Greenpeace International, but almost immediately he proved far too much for the organisation. Greenpeace now has a vast membership and a growing image of establishment semi-respectability; its leaders hobnob with prime ministers, oil magnates and Saudi princes. It is impossible to imagine Watson doing such a thing.

Even in 1969, when the organisation was founded, Watson was recognised by everyone as a handful. "He was a great warrior brother, yet in terms of the Greenpeace gestalt he seemed possessed by too powerful a drive, too unrelenting a desire to push himself front and centre, shouldering everyone else aside," said his great friend Robert Hunter. Watson sailed with Greenpeace many times, and skippered one of its boats in 1972. But he severed all links with the organisation in 1977, after being expelled from the Greenpeace board. He set up Sea Shepherd in 1981; today, it has 45,000 members, mostly in the US, and is supported by green stars such as Mick Jagger, Sean Penn, Orlando Bloom and Martin Sheen. Watson is proud of the written endorsement given to him by the Dalai Lama.

Last year, he summed up his feelings about Greenpeace: "There is lots of money in saving whales if you invest the money into direct mail campaigns, television and internet advertising. That is where Greenpeace funding primarily is directed - towards raising more funds in order to pay the wages and the operating expenses of what has become one of the largest feelgood organisations in the world.

"Let's face it, Greenpeace has become the generic environmental organisation and people feel when they join Greenpeace that they are part of the solution and not part of the problem. This is somewhat similar to when Pope Rodrigo Borgia once promised heaven to large donors to the church. It's now special ecological dispensation."

Watson calls himself an enforcer, and Greenpeace "the Avon ladies of the environment", interested mostly in publicity and "bearing witness".

Greenpeace refuses to be drawn. The organisation has consistently said it does not comment on Sea Shepherd's tactics or the often inflammatory and always colourful language that Watson uses about them. But this week the largest environment group in the world lost a lot of friends and some respect when, having skilfully found the Japanese fleet in more than 1m square miles of ocean, refused to share the information with Sea Shepherd.

"It's operational policy," Greenpeace explains. "We just do not do it. There's no favouritism. They offered them to us last year and we declined."

But the lack of help was leaped upon by Watson, who fired off an email to the Guardian. "Peter Hammarstedt, the second officer of the Steve Irwin, called the Esperanza to speak with the captain but was informed that the captain was sleeping and was not to be disturbed. Mr Hammarstedt spoke with Karli Thomas, the Greenpeace expedition leader, and congratulated her on finding the Japanese fleet and said that, since Sea Shepherd gave Greenpeace the coordinates last year, would they repay the favour and provide Sea Shepherd with the coordinates this year? Ms Thomas replied that, as expedition leader, she did not have the authority to release that information, nor did the captain of the Esperanza."

In the end, Greenpeace did come to the rescue, but not as expected. "We have our sources in Greenpeace - there are quite a few disgruntled Greenpeacers who are opposed to the policy of non-cooperation. They are being very helpful," says Watson, who is thought to have been tipped off about his rival's position by someone in Greenpeace International's head office in Amsterdam.

Right now there is a paper-thin truce, with both organisations saying that they are working towards a common objective - the shutting down of illegal whaling in the Southern Ocean - but it is sure to be only temporary.

Yesterday, Greenpeace were coy, but keen not to be seen as wusses. "We're not working together in any way. We have our interpretation [of direct action] and they have theirs, and we stick to ours," said a spokesperson. "We are a confrontational organisation. We will put ourselves at risk, but no one else. We would never place sailors on other ships in jeopardy. Our argument is not with the guys on the ships; our beef is with the [Japanese] ministries".

Watson is far more personal. "We are obsessed with stopping the cetacean Death Star, that vicious, cruel killing machine otherwise known as the Nisshin Maru, and her fleet of boats armed with explosive harpoons. We know that if we kill the whales, the sharks, the seals and the sea turtles, we will destroy the very foundation of life in the oceans," he says.

"The Japanese whalers are a disgrace to civilised society and the government of Japan should be ashamed of its subsidies and support for these bloody-minded cetacean serial killers. The Japanese are targeting endangered whales in a whale sanctuary in blatant violation of a global moratorium."

But it is not long before he gets back to the other battle: "We encourage

Greenpeace to be aggressive and wish them well in this high-seas drama. Sea Shepherd is preparing for the grand finale. I'm counting on Greenpeace - I'm hoping they can block some harpoons and harass them enough until we can arrive to shut the criminals down."

Quite what he means by "shut them down" is not clear. In the past he has scuttled several whaling ships and rammed others. "We did not come to protest. This is an international policing act. We do not intend to hurt anyone," he says. But is he prepared to ram or even attempt to sink the Japanese? "The circumstances will dictate. Our objective is to stop all whaling," he says.

Both Sea Shepherd and Greenpeace know they will inevitably meet in the Antarctic regularly, and fall out with each other constantly. But meanwhile, there have been no whales killed in the Southern Ocean in the past six days.

"We are 30 miles south of the Yushin Maru No 2, 700 miles from Greenpeace and the factory ship," said Watson from the bridge of the Irwin yesterday. "We are chasing three boats. The skies are clear and the sea is calm. As Sherlock Holmes would have said to Dr Watson, the game is afoot. And the chase is on".

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