Introduction: Advocacy and Conflict

The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (SSCS), created in 1977 by Paul Watson (a co-founder of the environmental group Greenpeace), has pursued a strategy of direct action—non-violent engagements including physical interference and obstruction—in a variety of campaigns on behalf of oceanic nonhuman animals, especially marine mammals such as whales and seals. The recent campaigns of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society in the waters surrounding Antarctica (what Hiroshi Hatanaka, the director general of Japan’s Institute of Cetacean Research termed “the Southern Ocean”)¹ (have gained public attention in the United States primarily through information (on websites and press releases) circulated through the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society and through the Animal Planet television series Whale Wars (which completed broadcasting its fifth season in August 2012). This television series features the SSCS deploying ocean-going vessels, (named after publicly recognized animal advocates including Farley Mowat, Steve Irwin, and Cleveland Armory, in order to challenge commercial whaling. As noted by Heller in his 2007 account of being aboard the Farley Mowat, Watson succinctly summarizes the Sea Shepherd strategy as “sink ships, but don’t break laws.”

The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society legitimizes its actions through appeals to international law and the scientific community in order to convince broad audiences that their actions are defending both marine life and the legal statutes against callous disregard and indifference towards law. Watson justifies the Sea Shepherd’s actions: that commercial whaling—especially in international oceanic sanctuaries—is illegal, and therefore actions undertaken to disrupt such hunts are legally sanctioned. Watson argues that one justification cited by Japanese whalers—that they

are actually gathering data on whales and therefore their actions are legally sanctioned—is false and indefensible. Conversely, Watson argues that he and the Sea Shepherds are acting on behalf of whales and other marine mammals and in keeping with international law:

Our intention is to stop the criminal whaling. We are not a protest organization. We are here to enforce international conservation law. We don’t wave banners. We intervene .... I don’t give a damn what you think. My clients are the whales and the seals. If you can find me one whale that disagrees with what we’re doing, we might reconsider.²

Despite efforts to elevate the status of whales and seals to “clients” worthy of protection, the Sea Shepherd’s primary strategy is to engage in direct actions against the Japanese whaling fleet (consisting of attempts to block whaling vessels from whales by superimposing SSCS vessels between the whalers and their targets, throwing foul-smelling butyric acid onto the decks of the Japanese fleet to both make the decks impassible and in the hopes of contaminating whale meat, and deploying “prop foulers” in the hopes of paralyzing or destroying the engines of the Japanese vessels) and through a rapid mediation and dissemination of the activities of the Farley Mowat and the Japanese whaling fleet to news media and supporters. Heller (2007) reports that, while the activities of the Farley Mowat themselves have limited effectiveness in actually inhibiting the Japanese whaling fleet, the press dispatches transmitted to the Sea Shepherd’s supporters and others become tactically significant in this conflict; Heller notes that due to negative public sentiment generated by communications from the Sea Shepherd and Greenpeace, the Japanese whaling fleet is unable to refuel at an Australian port, thereby delaying and limiting their hunt. Even a near collision between the Farley Mowat and the much larger Nisshin Maru is understood in terms of channeling political pressure and public outrage against the Japanese practice of whaling, as revealed in a conversation between Heller and Watson:

“There was a point there where it was up to him to whether we were T-boned or not.”

“Yes, he definitely had that choice, and he didn’t take it. If he would’ve ended it there, that would’ve probably ended commercial whaling. But I still believe that not sacrificing people for that, in that way, is probably a better choice.”

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