

# Resting Sea Shepherd: A Pause in the Whale War Saga

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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*Featured image: Sea Shepherd vessel Steve Irwin heads out to intercept Japanese whalers. (Source: [Inverse](#))*

*What a colourful run this outfit has had. Branded in 2013 by Judge Alex Kozinski of the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit as pirates, the Sea Shepherd crew will be hanging up their hooks while rethinking their whale protection strategy. Their long designated enemy, the Japanese whaling fleet, will be given some respite this hunting season.*

A crucial point here is evolution. The environmental battle, spearheaded by the Southern Ocean Whale Defence campaign, had become more troublingly sophisticated. “Military” tactics, claimed founder Captain Paul Watson, were being used by Japan. An already slippery adversary had raised the bar.

But Watson, in his announcement, was attempting to give some lustre to the long term efforts of the project. Against absurdly gargantuan odds, a small organisation’s resources were mustered to save whale species from imminent extinction.

“In 2005 we set out to tackle the world’s largest and most destructive whaling fleet.”[1]

It was a destruction centred on targeting 1,035 whales, including an annual quota of 50 endangered Fin whales and 50 endangered Humpbacks. The sceptics were to be found on all sides: they doomed the organisation’s mission to imminent, crestfallen failure.

The humble, worse for wear *Farley Mowat* was enlisted to harry Japanese whalers across the Southern Ocean. But to it were added, over time, the *Steve Irwin*, the *Bob Barker*, the *Sam Simon* the *Brigitte Bardot* and the *Ocean Warrior*.

For Watson and his dedicated piratical crew, the law of environmental protection often lagged, while political action and matters of enforcement proved timid. States with greater power and resources were simply not keen on ruffling Japanese feathers. Statements of disapproval hardly counted.

Japanese whalers have faced the legal music in a range of venues, though as with everything, the might of the gavel doesn’t necessary restrain the might of a state, whether directly used or incidentally employed. In November 2015, Kyodo Senpaku Kaisha was fined \$1 million by the Australian Federal Court for hunting minke whales within an Australian sanctuary as defined by Australian environmental law.[2] The whaling company cared not to turn up nor subsequently cough up.

Enter, then, the organisation's insistence on the use of "innovative direct-action tactics", thereby putting a premium on investigation, documentation and the taking of "action when necessary to expose and confront illegal activities on the high seas."

Preventive tactics, such as those employed in 2013 in the Southern Ocean, would feature attempts to prevent Japanese ships from taking refuelling sustenance from a tanker. On cue, both the crew of the Japanese vessels, and Sea Shepherd, would release material suggesting that the other had deliberately attempted to ram their ships.

On reaching the legal courts, the Sea Shepherd book of cetaceous protection tended to look more blotted. The Japanese angle in these instances was to emphasise the danger posed to crews, the potentially lethal bravado of the Sea Shepherd warriors. To do so offered a sizeable distraction from the legitimacy of the hunting activities.

"When you," directed a stern Judge Kozinski, "ram ships, hurl glass containers of acid, drag metal-reinforced ropes in the water to damage propellers and rudders, launch smoke bombs and flares with hooks; and point high-powered lasers at other ships, you are, without a doubt, a pirate." [3]

For years, the militant nature of the organisation brought various agents, and agencies, into play. It used guerrilla tactics of gumption and daring, though it was the sort of audaciousness that divided opinion, even in the environmental ranks. Such methods may well be crude but few could dispute their effects. In 2012/3, Japanese whalers, according to Watson, returned with a meagre 10 percent of intended kills.

The strategy of the Japanese whaling fleet, as Watson reflects, has always been shape shifting, apologetics followed by bellicosity; the fictional narrative of science overlaying arguments of culture. While still flouting legality, the number of intended whales has fallen to 333, a victory that can be, to a degree, chalked up to Sea Shepherd's techniques of mass irritation and disruption. But to this can be added a more expansive scope embraced by their adversary: wider killing grounds, more opportunities to gather their quarry.

By 2016/7, it was clear to Watson that the Japanese were still able to net their quota, albeit at greater expense in terms of time and cost. That same hunting season also threw up a few new realities: the use by the Japanese of "military surveillance to watch Sea Shepherd movements in real time by satellite". While the group, assisted by their helicopter, did get close to capture evidence of whaling, they "could not physically close the gap." Hence the sombre admission by Watson:

"We cannot compete with their military grade technology." [4]

Sea Shepherd's mission remains, as outlined on its web site, "to end the destruction of habitat and slaughter of wildlife in the world's oceans in order to conserve and protect ecosystems and species." [5] But more than a few in the Japanese whaling fleet will be pleased at the organisation's absence this killing season.

*Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: [bkampmark@gmail.com](mailto:bkampmark@gmail.com)*

Notes

[1] [https://www.seashepherdglobal.org/latest-news/whale-wars-continue/?edit\\_off](https://www.seashepherdglobal.org/latest-news/whale-wars-continue/?edit_off)

[2] [http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-18/federal-court-hands-kyodo-\\$1m-fine-to-japanese-whalers/6952508](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-18/federal-court-hands-kyodo-$1m-fine-to-japanese-whalers/6952508)

[3] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-21589352>

[4] [https://www.seashepherdglobal.org/latest-news/whale-wars-continue/?edit\\_off](https://www.seashepherdglobal.org/latest-news/whale-wars-continue/?edit_off)

[5] <http://www.seashepherd.org/>

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