

Open Water

Words by Kyle Winslow

With a passionate base of activists committed to protecting the world's oceans, Sea Shepherd sets its sights on the long haul.



2

At 14, Peter Hammarstedt saw an image of a whale being dragged by hooks up the slipway of a whaling ship operating in the Antarctic. "The image of this majestic 7- or 8-ton creature being swallowed by a factory ship shook me to my core," he recalls, "and then seeing the image of activists in comparatively tiny boats trying to intervene, I knew I wanted to be one of the people in those little boats."

Four years later, as soon as he was old enough to submit an application, he joined the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, a nonprofit organization that has patrolled the world's oceans in defense of marine wildlife since 1977—and for whom Hammarstedt now helms one of those "little boats." Dedication to direct-action tactics has placed members of the group in confrontation with pirates, poachers, and hostile governments and has seen them wager their physical safety and legal freedom in pursuit of a better world for oceans and the diversity of flora and fauna that call them home.

Sea Shepherd's mission—"to end the destruction of habitat and slaughter of wildlife in the world's oceans in order to conserve and protect ecosystems and species"—addresses what they call a "law enforcement vacuum." Much of the whaling and an overwhelming percent of the illegal fishing that Sea Shepherd seeks to end is carried out in waters belonging to a particular country, but many enforcement voids exist, and United Nations regulations against overfishing and habitat exploitation are violated with relative impunity. Despite having coast guards, marine police, or Navy forces, many coastal governments lack the ships and patrol assets to devote to tracking illegal hunts in their waters, to devastating effect on the biodiversity of the ocean's ecosystems.

Haunted by that image of the whale and inspired by activism, Hammarstedt joined Greenpeace as a teenager, just before his native Sweden accidentally cast the deciding vote to allow Iceland to renew its whaling practices at a meeting of the International Whaling Commission. The Swedish delegation

claimed that they were confused by part of the voting process but were denied the request for a recast. "I remember realizing that all of a sudden, hundreds of whales were condemned to die because bureaucracy didn't allow three minutes for a revote," he says. "I suppose it was then in my life that I lost a lot of faith in government solutions to things."

Now 32, Hammarstedt is captain of a Sea Shepherd vessel, the *M/Y Bob Barker*, and Director of Ship Operations for Sea Shepherd Global, among other titles. For 15 years, he has been with Sea Shepherd as they've employed direct intervention techniques to deter illegal whaling, sealing, and fishing operations off the coasts of all seven continents. According to Hammarstedt, a diversity of tactics is paramount when working toward social or political change.

"Like an ecosystem, a movement is only as strong as it is diverse," he says. "You need a group pushing for policy change as well as radical groups willing to challenge existing laws. Sea Shepherd works so well for me because it upholds laws but is willing to use a direct interventionist approach where a law enforcement vacuum exists."

Due to overfishing and other habitat exploitation, only about 10 percent of the world's fisheries are doing well enough to be considered healthy. In his time with Sea Shepherd, Hammarstedt has seen the state of the world's oceans steadily decline as illegal and unregulated fishing practices have drawn fisheries onto a path to eventual collapse. Despite irrefutable evidence that a healthy ocean is critical to the survival of life on the planet, the illicit killing of marine life is often, per Hammarstedt, "considered an administrative matter more so than a criminal act."

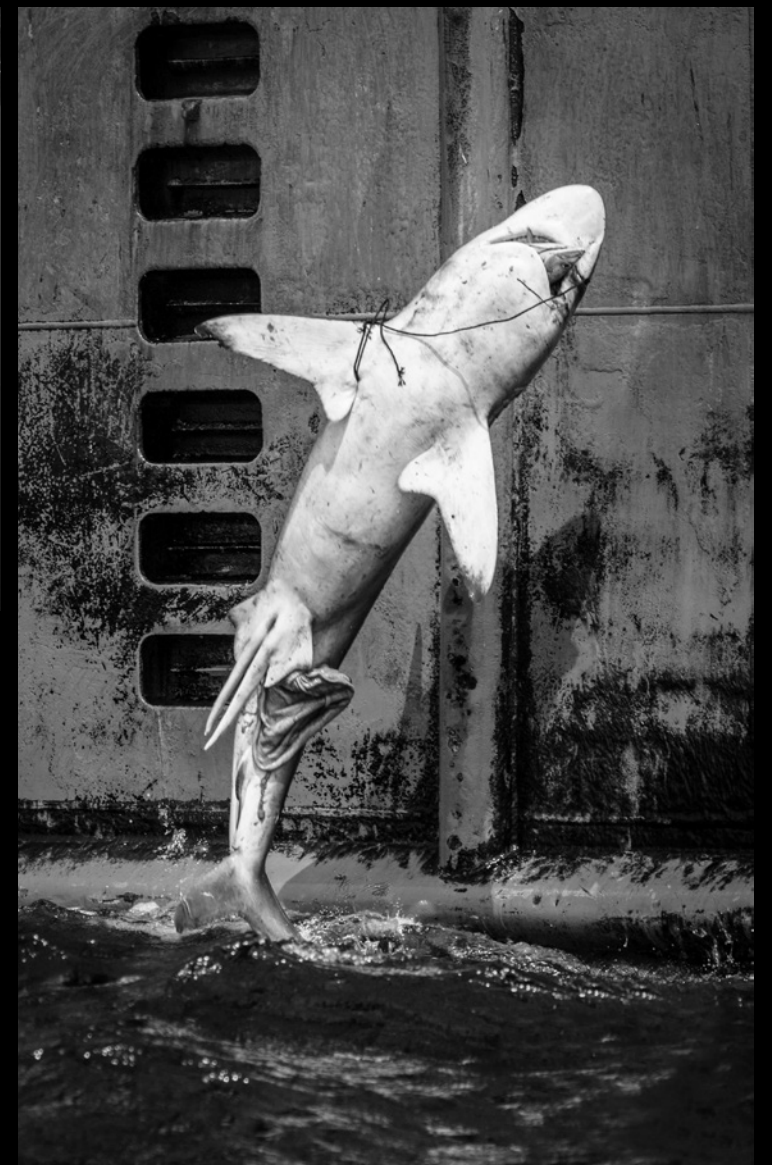
Like many shadowy trades, illegal commercial fishing is intertwined with a host of convergent crimes that it needs to support its activities. According to Hammarstedt, those crimes are myriad: "document forgery, tax evasion, customs violations, [and] human trafficking" among them. "Only recently has illegal fishing gained international recognition as a branch of organized

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crime," he says, "so there is a tremendous human cost." Scores of subsistence fishermen around the world are already experiencing the plight of fisheries overtaxed by unregulated activity.

Sea Shepherd disrupts such activity by directly engaging with the perpetrators, finding the poachers wherever they're working and frustrating their attempts to hunt, whether by destroying the illegal nets they leave strewn across the ocean or by confronting the ships and crews themselves. "Where we're successful is that we speak the only language that poachers understand, and that's profit and loss," Hammarstedt says. "We make it cost more for them to poach than they would gain by continuing."

Early Sea Shepherd missions brought them to seal hunts in Canada where they marked seal pups with harmless but permanent dyes to make the white fur worthless as a commodity. These are the infamous baby seal hunts that have borne countless boycotts of Canadian goods and tourism in response to the brutal clubbing deaths of thousands of baby seals. For 40 years, Sea Shepherd founder Captain Paul Watson and his crews have hunted the hunters at sea whenever possible and spent their remaining energy in appeals to various governing bodies about the inhumanity of slaughtering marine mammals. They have long been at the forefront of the anti-whaling movement but have increased their efforts to curb destructive overfishing activity in recent years.

"Our vision isn't attempting to save the ocean all at once but rather to protect critical areas that we call 'islands of biodiversity,' like the Galapagos Islands, which are a crucial shark migration area, and Antarctica, one of the few wildernesses we have left," Hammarstedt says. "These are where we dig in our positions and fight to ensure the habitats remain resilient enough to survive."

Although half of the world's population depends on the ocean for survival, most people never directly witness marine poaching crimes, committed at sea and under its surface. For this reason, Sea Shepherd documents all of their missions on

video so they can be seen by anyone with an Internet connection. Yet Hammarstedt is wary of "an overreliance on technological solutions," he says, and cautions that technological advancement can also benefit the poachers, with GPS and sonar allowing them to stay on the hunt longer.

Sea Shepherd's intent is to assist nations with the resources and training needed for them to take over responsibility for protecting their coastal environments. And while Hammarstedt notes that "it really should be the world's navies doing the work we do," he maintains there isn't time to wait. "We're seeing an ever-increasing grassroots movement of people who don't expect governments to solve all of our problems. We've seen that with climate change and we're seeing that with ocean conservation as well."

With a large, committed volunteer base (more than 80 percent of crew members of its six-ship fleet are there on the strength of their passions alone) and an understanding that mobilizing and energizing people is an integral part of ensuring endurance for the long haul, Sea Shepherd seeks to persevere not only as an organization but as a movement. "Now more than ever, we need a free press to tell these stories because we're seeing an increasingly conglomerated media," Hammarstedt says. "The environmental movement needs a diversity of journalists to document news, but also lawyers and law enforcers and people willing to chain themselves to gates to prevent these destructive forces from succeeding. We need musicians with a large base to speak to and people in general to look at their biggest point of passion to come to the rescue of the oceans by contributing through what they enjoy. Activism has to be sustainable."

Ultimately, it's about turning that passion and leadership into quantifiable results, even if they remain hidden in the vastness of the sea. Hammarstedt breaks down lofty visions into simple terms, which for Sea Shepherd are intrinsically linked: "We measure success in the lives we save and by the number of criminal organizations we shut down."







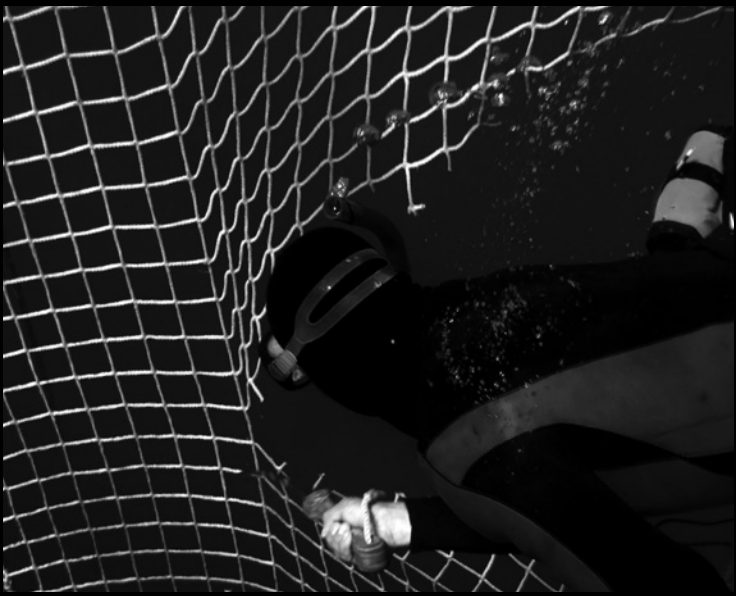
13



15



14



16

- 1
The bow of the *Bob Barker* in bad weather in Antarctica, 2013
Photograph by Simon Ager

2
Bob Barker Captain Peter Hammarstedt, 2014
Photograph by Simon Ager

3
Small boat evading the Japanese harpoon ship *Shonan Maru No. 2* on Operation Relentless, Antarctica, 2014
Photograph by Tim Watters
- 4
Japanese harpoon ship with a dead whale on Operation Zero Tolerance, 2013
Photograph by Marianna Baldo

5
Humpback whales "grind" hunt, 2010
Photograph by Matt Curnock

6
Shark by-catch being discarded from a fishing vessel in Gabon on Operation Albacore, 2016
Photograph by Alejandra Gimco
- 7
Dead sharks on a ship arrested by local authorities in the Galapagos National Park
Photograph by Tim Watters

8
Dead pilot whale and fetus killed in Faroe Islands "grind" hunt, 2010
Photograph by Peter Hammarstedt

9
A dead pilot whale from a Faroe Islands "grind" hunt (the locals divide up the dead animals to eat; numbers carved on the skin refer to the "lot" for distribution)
- 10
A Bryde's whale trapped in a fishing net in Gabon; Sea Shepherd divers helped release it on Operation Albacore, 2016
Photograph by Lukas Erichsen

11
The *Bob Barker* from above in Africa, 2016
Photograph by Lukas Erichsen

12
The *Steve Irwin* in Antarctica for Operation Relentless, 2014
Photograph by Tim Watters
- 13
The rogue *Thunder* vessel scuttled by its own captain after a 110-day chase by the *Bob Barker* on Operation Icefish, with the Sam Simon in the background to help rescue crew, 2015
Photograph by Simon Ager

14
The *Bob Barker's* small boat in action in the Southern Ocean
Photograph by Jo-Anne McArthur

15
The *Farley Mowat* in Antarctica
- 16
Sea Shepherd diver cutting nets in Libyan waters to free bluefin tuna on Operation Blue Rage, 2010
Photograph by Simon Ager

17
Jeff Hansen on the deck of the *Bob Barker* in the Southern Ocean
- All images courtesy of Sea Shepherd

