

What It's Like to Watch a Harpooned Whale Die Right Before Your Eyes

By Captain Paul Watson, Sea Shepherd Conservation Society

Author Paul Watson has no problem with critics calling him and his marine-life-defending colleagues pirates—it's far better than helplessly standing by and doing nothing in the face of the violence against animals they have witnessed.

The following excerpt is from [Death of a Whale](#), by Captain Paul Watson (GroundSwell Books, 2021). This web adaptation was produced by GroundSwell Books in partnership with [Earth | Food | Life](#), a project of the Independent Media Institute.



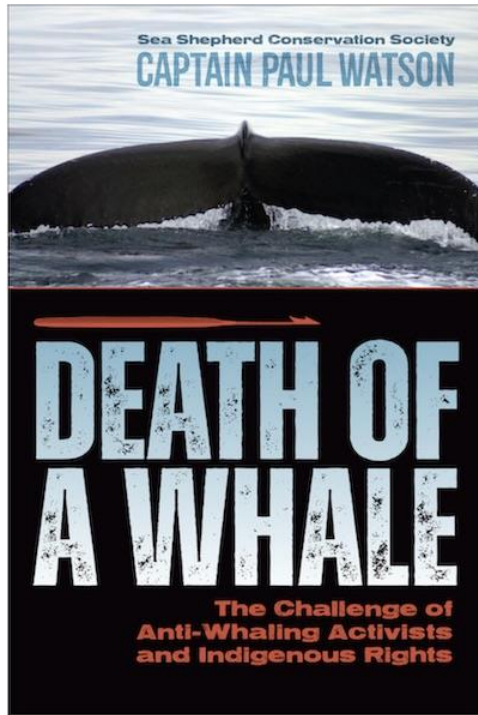
Whale of a tail: A sperm whale's fluke breaches the water's surface off the coast of Canterbury, New Zealand. Sperm whales have a worldwide range, with females giving birth every four to twenty years and caring for their young for more than ten years. (Photo credit: Bernard Spragg/[Flickr](#))

In 1975, Robert Hunter and I were the first people to physically block a harpooner's line of fire when we intercepted a Soviet whaling fleet and placed our bodies between the killers and eight fleeing, frightened sperm whales. We were in a small inflatable boat, speeding before the plunging steel prow of a Russian kill boat. As the whales fled for their lives before us, we could smell the fear in their misty exhalations. We thought we could make a difference with our Gandhi-inspired seagoing stand. Surely these men behind the harpoons would not risk killing a human being to satisfy their lust for whale oil and meat. We were wrong.

The whalers demonstrated their contempt for our nonviolent protests by firing an explosive harpoon over our heads. The harpoon line slashed into the water and we narrowly escaped death. One of the whales was not so lucky. With a dull thud followed by a muffled explosion, the entrails of a female whale were torn and ripped apart by hot steel shrapnel.

The large bull sperm whale in the midst of the pod abruptly rose and dove. Experts had told us that a bull whale in this situation would attack us. We were a smaller target than the whaling ship. Anxiously, we held our breath in anticipation of sixty tons of irate muscle and blood torpedoing from the depths below our frail craft.

The ocean erupted behind us. We turned toward the Soviet ship to see a living juggernaut hurl itself at the Russian bow. The harpooner was ready. He pulled the trigger and sent a second explosive missile into the massive head of the whale. A pitiful scream rang in my ears, a fountain of blood geysered into the air, and the deep blue of the ocean was rapidly befouled with dark red blood. The whale thrashed and convulsed violently.



Learn more at [Death of a Whale](#)

Mortally wounded and crazed with pain, the whale rolled, and one great eye made contact with mine. The whale dove, and a trail of bloody bubbles moved laboriously toward us. Slowly, very slowly, a gargantuan head emerged from the water, and the whale rose at an angle over and above our tiny craft. Blood and brine cascaded from the gaping head wound and fell upon us in torrents.

We were helpless. We knew that we would be crushed within seconds as the whale fell upon us. There was little time for fear, only awe. We could not move.

The whale did not fall upon us. He wavered and towered motionless above us. I looked up past the daggered six-inch teeth and into the eye the size of my fist, an eye that reflected back intelligence and spoke wordlessly of compassion and communicated to me the understanding that this was a being that could discriminate and understood what we had tried to do. The mammoth body slowly slid back into the sea.

The massive head of this majestic sperm whale slowly fell back into the sea. He rolled and the water parted, revealing a solitary eye. The gaze of the whale seized control of my soul, and I saw my own image reflected back at me. I was overcome with pity, not for the whale but for ourselves. Waves of shame crashed down upon me and I wept. Overwhelmed with horror at this revelation of the cruel blasphemy of my species, I realized then and there that my allegiance lay with this dying child of the sea and his kind. On that day, I left the comfortable realm of human self-importance to forever embrace the soulful satisfaction of lifelong service to the citizens of the sea.

The gentle giant died with my face seared upon his retina. I will never forget that. It is a memory that haunts and torments me and leaves me with only one course to chart toward redemption for the collective sins of humanity. It is both my burden and my joy to pledge my allegiance to the most intelligent and profoundly sensitive species of beings to have ever inhabited the Earth—the great whales.

Reykjavik, Iceland, November 1986

Despite the criticisms, the name-calling, and the controversy that have arisen from our work since 1975, one indisputable fact emerged from a raid made by my crew (which included Rod Coronado of the U.S. and David Howitt of the UK) on two whaling ships in Reykjavik in 1986 in order to enforce an international moratorium on commercial whaling that had been established that year: it was successful.

The two whaling ships were razed, although their electronics and mechanical systems had been totally destroyed. Insurance did not cover the losses because the owners had stated that terrorists sank the ships, and apparently they were not insured for terrorism.

Most importantly, from that day of November 8, 1986, to sixteen years later in the year 2002, the Icelanders did not take another whale. What talk, compromise, negotiations, meetings, letters, petitions, and protests had not accomplished, we achieved with a little monkey-wrenching activity in the wee hours of the morning.

Were we terrorists? No, not even criminals, for we were never charged with a crime, even though we made ourselves available for prosecution. We had simply done our duty, and we put an end to an unlawful activity.

The only repercussion was that Iceland moved before the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1987 that the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society be banned from holding observer status at the meetings of the IWC. After this passed, Iceland resigned from the IWC, leaving us with the distinction of being the only organization to enjoy the status of banishment from the IWC.

How ironic, I thought, to be the only organization banned from the IWC because we were the only organization to have ever enforced an IWC ruling.

It was not much of a punishment. I had never enjoyed listening to the delegates of the member nations barter whales like they were bushels of wheat or pork bellies. I also never had much use for the posturing of the nongovernmental organizations pretending that they were actually making a difference by attending this annual circus. All that we were interested in were the rulings of the IWC, and we fully intended to continue to enforce those rulings.

I have been asked many times why we consider the IWC rulings important. Why not just oppose all whaling everywhere? The answer is that we do oppose all whaling by everyone, everywhere. However, we only actively attack whaling operations that are in violation of international conservation law. The reason for this is simple: We do not presume to be the judges and jury. We simply execute the rulings of the IWC or the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) or any rulings from international conservation authorities, and we do so in accordance with the [definition](#) of intervention as defined by the 1982 United Nations World Charter for Nature, Part III (Implementation), Principle 21, Section (e): “States and, to the extent they are able, other public authorities, international organizations, individuals, groups and corporations shall... Safeguard and conserve nature in areas beyond national jurisdiction.”

As a seaman, I have a great and abiding respect for the traditions of the law of the sea. To attack without a vested authority would be piracy. Thus, the difference between a privateer like Sir Francis Drake and a pirate like Blackbeard was that the former was in possession of a letter of marque from a sovereign authority and the latter practiced the same trade solely upon his own authority.

I have never considered it my place to judge the illegal activities of others. However, I feel that when there are laws and international treaties that it is the responsibility of individuals and nongovernmental organizations to strive toward the implementation of these rulings, especially in light of the fact that there is no international body empowered to police these international laws. Nation-states intervene when it is advantageous for them to do so, but little enforcement is carried out in the interests of the common good of all citizens of the planet.

It is worth noting that it was not the British or Spanish navies that brought the piracy of the Caribbean under control in the 17th century. There were too many conflicts of interest, too much corruption, and too little motivation for any real action to have been taken. The bureaucracies in the British admiralty and the Spanish court did nothing because the very nature of a bureaucracy is the maintenance of the status quo. The achievement of first shutting down piracy on the Spanish Main is attributed to one man—a pirate himself.

Henry Morgan did what two nations chose not to do: he drove the pirates to ground and ended their reign of terror. As a result, the “pirate” was made governor of Jamaica, although history would show that the man was far more effective as a pirate than as a politician. In fact, he was more of a pirate as a politician than he was as an actual pirate.

When Andrew Jackson failed to get the support of the merchants of New Orleans to back his attack on the British, it was a pirate who came to his service in the personage of Jean Lafitte. When the United States successfully endeavored to cast off the yoke of British rule, it was a pirate who achieved the most dramatic and successful naval victory at sea. That person was captain John Paul Jones. Consequently, it is a pirate who was the founder of what is today the world’s most powerful navy.

Today, with the pirates of corrupt industry aided by corrupt politicians plundering our oceans for the last of the fish, killing the last of the whales, and polluting the waters, we find that there is very little real resistance to their activities upon the high seas. Once again it is time for some good pirates to rise up in opposition to the bad pirates, and I believe that the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society is just such an organization of good pirates.

When our critics call us pirates, I have no problem with that. In fact, we have taken their criticisms and in an aikido-like manner; we have incorporated their accusations into our image. Our ships are sometimes painted a monochromatic black. We have designed our own version of the pretty red [a flag which, when translated to French, becomes “*joli rouge*” and is rumored to have inspired the “jolly roger” phrase applied to pirate flags], and our black-and-white flag flies from our mast during campaigns. We even carry cannons, with the difference being that our guns fire cream pies and not red-hot balls.

As good pirates, we have evolved to suit the time and culture in which we live, and this being a media-defined culture, our primary weapons are the camera, the video, and the internet. Like modern-day Robin Hoods, we take from the greedy and give back to the sea. We don’t profit materially, but we profit tremendously both spiritually and psychologically.

*Captain Paul Watson is a Canadian-American marine conservation activist who founded the direct action group the [Sea Shepherd Conservation Society](#) in 1977 and was more recently featured in *Animal Planet’s* popular television series “*Whale Wars*” and the documentary about his life, “[Watson](#).” *Sea Shepherd’s* mission is to protect all ocean-dwelling marine life. Watson has authored or co-authored more than a dozen [books](#), including [Death of a Whale](#) (2021), [Urgent!](#) (2021), [Orcapedia](#) (2020), [Dealing](#)*

[with Climate Change and Stress](#) (2020), [The Haunted Mariner](#) (2019), and [Captain Paul Watson: Interview with a Pirate](#) (2013).