



ALL AT SEA

Anna Greer on campaigning with Sea Shepherd

‘It is just water going up and going down,’ the captain said in his thick French accent.

By that stage I was familiar with the going up and down, but water isn’t *just* water when it’s being churned up by the wind in one of the most inhospitable oceans on Earth. It is a force of destruction. Its power is humbling, especially when one is in the middle of a storm on a fibreglass trimaran. And last year, this particular boat had taken on a storm and lost – one of its pontoons was almost ripped off by a wave and the vessel had to be escorted back to port.

I was in the Southern Ocean with Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, on the *MV Brigitte Bardot*, a high-speed interceptor and scout vessel named

after the French actress-and-model-turned-animal-welfare-activist and long-time Sea Shepherd supporter.

Simon, the ship manager, a burly guy with a short fuse, had lived on the boat for three years by that stage. He was agitated and anxious, and probably thought the captain far too relaxed about the situation. Simon didn’t want to see history repeat, with the *Bardot* struggling back to land again before the campaign even got under way. Nevertheless, we had to endure the bad weather to avoid the worse weather.

The swell hit with a thunderous clap, sending a shudder through the boat. Unsecured objects went flying through the air, and anyone not

holding on was slammed into the wall. We had a sling across the edges of our bunks to restrain us in rough seas, but it wasn't always enough. In those patches, sleep was hard to come by. I was on alert: my body would sense a big wave coming and brace itself against my mattress, tensing its muscles to prevent me from being thrown out of the top bunk.

Sea Shepherd Conservation Society is best known for its anti-whaling campaigns. This season the organisation sent four ships with 120 volunteer crew to intervene against whaling in the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary. Because of this, the whalers took less than 10 per cent of their catch quota – in other words, 932 whales are still swimming free.

It was the ninth year that Sea Shepherd sent ships to the sanctuary to disrupt Japanese whalers, who exploit a loophole in the commercial whaling moratorium allowing lethal research. After the 'research', the meat ends up on the commercial market.

The *Bardot's* role is to go fast. If the location of the whaling fleet is known, the *Bardot* can arrive before any of our other ships and follow the whalers. Unfortunately, the *Bardot* is not built for the stormy waters of the Southern Ocean, nor the icy environment of Antarctica. Condensation builds

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inside and sends water over everything, including beds. We hooked up a hair dryer to clear the condensation from the bridge windows, where the deck crew and officers would take shifts watching for ice. The *Bardot* needed to be careful not only of large icebergs but also of small growlers that could

potentially damage or punch a hole in the hull.

There were days in Antarctica that were really beautiful and calm. Before the whaling fleet arrived, we spent our time in the calm waters closer to the ice, where humpbacks and endangered fin whales were feeding on the krill that flourishes there. The stillness and peace soothed the tensions that inevitably build between crew members cooped up in a small space for too long. We could pause and be astounded by the breath-taking landscapes and wild energy of Antarctica.

My on-board roles were cook and photographer. I am neither of those things professionally, and I didn't have any prior experience at sea. I work as a yoga teacher, and I became involved with the organisation when the *MY Bob Barker* was docked in Sydney. The yoga studio at which I work had offered free memberships to the crew, and sometimes they attended my class after a hard day of manual labour on the ship. I started helping out on the *Barker* a couple of days a week in the lead-up to the campaign.

At sea, I didn't become one with the ocean, but I did learn to accept its ways. The sea is powerful, but its strength comes only with the help of the wind and currents, the movement of the Earth and the pull of the moon. I had to learn to dance to the ocean's beat, for it had its own unique rhythm. Sometimes that was impossible: the rhythm was too syncopated, too irregular. But eventually I stopped struggling, surrendering instead to the waves going up and going down.

I wasn't particularly prone to incapacitating seasickness, but there was definitely an adjustment period during which I experienced an underlying, low-level nausea. It was unpleasant but mostly benign. I remember wondering if I would ever feel okay, but after a couple of months, feeling nauseous was rare. Nonetheless, rough weather was frustrating. Preparing the meals meant long battles with the galley – and it would usually win. Each time we docked at port, I would have bruises on my bruises.

But I wasn't on board for my own comfort; I went into the campaign knowing it wouldn't be a holiday. I joined Sea Shepherd because I am

interested in compassion and believe in direct action to prevent the suffering of the other creatures. I wanted to do something tangible, to pay off some of the debt I owed the Earth. I also wanted to overcome the concern for personal wellbeing that so often stops good people from taking action.

Whales are incredible animals, but I saw the mission as about more than the protection of one particular species. The ocean is an alien place for humans, yet if we pay attention, it can teach us vital lessons about interconnection. The ocean creates most of the oxygen we breathe; it drives climate and weather patterns; it is home to 94 per cent of life on Earth; it makes up 72 per cent of the planet's surface. As oceanographer and aquanaut Sylvia Earle put it: 'With every drop of water you drink, every breath you take, you're connected to the sea. No matter where on Earth you live.'

Healthy oceans are essential for humankind. Even if we don't realise it, we are all profoundly linked to the sea.

Despite its crucial role in balancing the Earth's ecosystems, the ocean is woefully unprotected and subject to the most destructive of human practices. Sea Shepherd's mission has always been to save lives, to act when others can't or won't. The organisation isn't just about protecting whales – it campaigns against sealing, shark-finning, the culling and hazing of sea lions in California and the slaughter of dolphins in Taiji. It works with law enforcement in places like the Galápagos Islands, patrolling marine reserves, busting poachers and setting up infrastructure for future conservation work.

But at the same time, the Institute for Cetacean Research and the Japanese government are stepping up attacks on Sea Shepherd and its founder, Paul Watson, in the US courts, trying to curtail the organisation's intervention in the Southern Ocean. They also want Paul Watson extradited to Japan.

The Japanese whaling fleet consists of three harpoon vessels, a security ship from the Japanese Coast Guard, a factory ship and a tanker. Each

year, Sea Shepherd seeks to position one of its ships behind the slipway of the factory ship and to maintain this position for as long as possible. This means the hunting vessels can't transfer their catch, effectively shutting down the hunting. That is, of course, unless the fleet can force Sea

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Shepherd out of position. Each year our organisation has become more effective – and the whalers have become ever more aggressive and frustrated.

The *Bardot* was the first to find the whaling fleet this year, even before a single whale had been killed. Late one night, Kate, an Australian deckhand in her early twenties, came to my bunk, saying excitedly that we had found a harpoon ship. Kate always woke me if there was something to see: a pod of dolphins riding our bow at 5 am; a noisy penguin circling the boat at 11 pm; *Yushin Maru No. 3*, the harpoon ship, trying to hide in the middle of the night. As the ship cook, I didn't spend as much time on the bridge as the rest of the crew, so I was grateful to be kept in the loop.

I jumped out of bed and ran up to the bridge, where everyone was in action mode. It was dark except for the lights of the radar and navigation systems, and there was a palpable sense of anticipation. After seeing us on their radar, the whalers had also turned off all their lights; now they were merely a shadow lurking in the darkness.

They took us into the fog and we lost sight, but we stayed with them on the radar as they lured us towards the icy waters further south, trying to damage our boat.

And it continued like this – they took us away from the search for the factory ship; we took them away from the hunt.

The other ships in our fleet – the *MY Sam Simon*, the *MY Steve Irwin* and the *Barker* – continued searching for the *Nisshin Maru*, the factory



ship where the whales are processed.

The *Bardot* had done what it could in locating the whalers so returned to Hobart. I knew that our small boat wasn't ideal for the long chase and that it was probably best for her to be away from the fray, but it was sad to leave the campaign earlier than the rest of our fleet. As I followed the unfolding drama from land, I worried for my friends on the other ships. I won't pretend it wasn't good to be back on land after so long at sea – the coastal wilderness of southern Tasmania was a sweet sight.

Our other ships continued westward in pursuit of the *Nisshin* and the whaling fleet, covering over 10 000 kilometres. Clashes between the whalers and activists arose when Sea Shepherd prevented the factory ship from refuelling in Antarctic waters: the *Barker* got in between the tanker and the factory ship, stopping the *Nisshin* from coming alongside and taking on fuel.

The towering factory ship eventually rammed its own tanker along with the three Sea Shepherd ships, throwing flash bang grenades across the *Barker's* bow (one of which flew across the *Barker*

and exploded on the fuel tanker) and pummelling the smoke stack and bridge with high-powered water cannons, in an attempt to flood the engine room and interfere with the electronics.

Despite all this, the *Barker* stood its ground.

Sea Shepherd calls its tactics 'aggressive non-violence'. Although inanimate objects or a ship's paint job might come off worse for wear, Sea Shepherd's intention is always to prevent violence, to save the giants of the Southern Ocean from the poachers' harpoons.

The movement prioritises life over property and profit. It takes any precautions necessary to prevent harm coming to the whalers, even if they don't always show us the same regard. On the bridge of Sea Shepherd's mother ship, the *Steve Irwin*, stands a statue of the Buddhist bodhisattva Hayagriva, the warrior of non-violence, the wrathful manifestation of compassion. This Hayagriva was a gift from the Dalai Lama, and with the statue came some advice: 'You never want to hurt anyone, but sometimes when they

cannot see enlightenment, you scare the hell out of them until they do.'

This year, the tactics accorded more closely to classic non-violent direct action. There were no sensational flourishes like throwing rancid butter (which has the distinct and unpleasant odour of vomit, and ruins any whale meat exposed to it on the deck) or shooting paint balls at the whaling vessels.

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The Sea Shepherd ships simply put themselves in the way and stood their ground – it was, in other words, a high-seas sit-in. The confrontations extensively damaged the *Barker* and the *Simon*, and ship repairs are going to cost the organisation hundreds of thousands of dollars. But the Sea Shepherd ships have always been expendable, mere tools to get the job done.

The most dramatic part of the confrontation came when the *Nisshin* closed in on the *Barker*, forcing it into the fuel tanker and then squeezing it between the two ships. The *Barker* is a small ship of only 500 tonnes, and it was sandwiched between the 8000-tonne factory ship and the 5000-tonne tanker. Captain Peter Hammarstedt gave the captain of the *Nisshin* a choice – either stand down or sink the *Barker*. When it became clear that the *Barker* wasn't going to cede its position, the *Nisshin* backed down.

There is something special about direct action; there is an instantaneous shift that occurs when it is done well. That is not to say that uplifting collective social consciousness through outreach and education matters less. However, direct action gets things done. It has an immediate impact on lives in the here and now. The great leaders of past non-violent protest movements made the establishment feel uncomfortable as the world shifted around them, leaving them struggling to catch up. And it is undeniable that the world is all the

better for great souls like Martin Luther King, Jr. refusing to heed requests to 'go slow'.

The campaign this year was dubbed Operation Zero Tolerance. The aim was to save every whale from the harpoon. We didn't succeed in that, but we did have our most successful campaign yet. The Japanese whalers intended on taking 50 threatened humpbacks and fifty endangered fin whales, on top of their quota for 935 minke whales. They didn't catch any fin or humpbacks; they returned home with only 103 southern minke whales. The poachers have blamed our 'unforgiveable sabotage' for their lowest catch since they started whaling in the sanctuary in 1987.

Talking with Peter in Melbourne after the campaign, he reminded me of a Gandhi quote. Once, when asked if he was a pacifist, Gandhi replied: 'I, for one, have never advocated passive anything ... I think our resistance must be active and provocative!' No-one could ever accuse Sea Shepherd of being passive. The organisation's boldness may alienate some, but thousands of whales are free and alive because of Sea Shepherd's active and provocative actions in the Southern Ocean.