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OPINION

Saving whales: a cause worth fighting war

The Drum By Reese Halter

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In the 20th century humans slaughtered 1.5 million whales. It's time now to end the whale hunt and The War Against Nature, writes Reese Halter.

Four Japanese whaling boats have once again set sail for the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary. And four Sea Shepherd Conservation Society boats with 120 crew representing 26 nations are waiting to intercept and stop them.

It is without a doubt the most courageous and perhaps meaningful fight in The War Against Nature as the new year of 2013 commences.

This year the stakes are at an all-time high as the Japanese have armed coast guards on their boats, and a recent ruling by the US Court of Appeals stated that Sea Shepherd boats are to remain at least 500 yards from whaling vessels.

Led by their founder Paul Watson the Sea Shepherd has recently added a new fourth vessel - in a twist of fate, buying a former Japanese meteorological research boat with a gift from Sam Simon, one of the creators of the television cartoon series The Simpsons. And the Sea Shepherd has just appointed Dr Bob Brown, a long-time environmental champion and former Greens leader to their Australian board of directors. With two helicopters and three aerial drones, their largest-ever battle has daring goals: Zero Tolerance: Zero Cruelty: Zero Kills.

Later this year at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, Australia and New Zealand's charges against Japanese whaling will be heard and ruled upon. But before that Sea Shepherd activists will fight to protect nature, in an effort to end an antiquated, senseless, unnecessary and cruel blood-lusting hunt.

The fact that the Japanese old guard is displaying a sense of entitlement to enter a whale sanctuary and perform lethal research under the auspice of scientific research is repugnant.

Little (if any) credible whale research has been conducted or released over the past quarter of a century by the Institute of Cetacean Research in Japan. By the way, they did not attend the Symposium of Living Whales in the Southern Ocean last year in Puerto Varas, Chile, where researchers gathered and compared notes on non-lethal research. Nor were scientists from the Institute of Cetacean Research involved in last year's finding that humpback whales sing while they multitask e.g. during feeding or breeding, or whale research that showed eating right is the key to both whale, dolphin and human survival.

Not only do the Japanese illegally hunt whales in an international sanctuary feigning meaningful scientific research, they sell the whale meat into the marketplace.

Since 2006 the demand for whale meat has fallen off dramatically, so much so that by 2008 several tons of whale meat were unwanted by the market and placed in cold storage.

In 2011, 88 per cent of Japanese polled had not bought whale meat for at least a year. As if this weren't enough credence to end the persecution of southern whales the Japanese whaling industry is subsidised to the tune of \$US6 million a year, and siphoned \$US29 million from the March 2011 (tsunami) Earthquake Recovery Fund.

Over the past two years the Sea Shepherd activists sent the whalers home with a fraction of their quotas. During the last eight years the intervening actions of the Sea Shepherd have spared the lives of over 4,000 southern whales.



PHOTO: Japanese whaling fleet in the Southern Ocean

As a conservation biologist and concerned citizen I applaud the Sea Shepherd interventions and note that whales around the globe have the right to live on our blue planet just as much as any other living creature including humans.

We need the whales because they are showing scientists how quickly global warming is occurring, helping to determine the extent of the hole in the ozone layer; and, since 40 per cent of the ocean's phytoplankton is missing from warming ocean temperatures and ocean acidification (from absorbing rising levels of CO₂), the whales are crucial in their role to fertilise the oceans and replenish phytoplankton - the base of the entire marine food web.

Researchers from the Zoological Society of London and Queen Mary University found that the whales from the Gulf of California showed the hole in the ozone layer was getting worse, allowing lethal UV radiation to penetrate Earth's protective ozone shield and causing skin cancers and cataracts.

Researchers from Harvard University and the University of Vermont have found that humpback whales in the Gulf of Maine carry massive quantities of nitrogen from the deep sea where they feed to the surface and release it in their liquid-like faeces. Essentially, humpbacks function as an "upward biological pump."

It turns out that humpbacks contribute more nitrogen to the Gulf of Maine than all the local rivers combined, an estimated 25,000 metric tons, annually.

In turn, these nutrients allow more phytoplankton to grow which increases the food supply at the base of the marine food web therefore promoting bigger fisheries and higher abundance where whales occur in greater densities.

Clearly, it is erroneous, as the Japanese tout, that whales compete with their commercial fisheries; rather, they enhance them.

Lastly, the iconic, spiralled tooth narwhals, permanent residences of the high Arctic possess brains-to-body sizes just slightly smaller than humans. These extraordinary beauties of a beast dive greater than 1.6 kilometres in pitch-dark icy Arctic water, relying upon echolocation or sonar to hunt, only during the winter, Greenland halibut. They spend up to three hours a day at least a half a mile from the surface, exquisitely adapted to over 80 atmospheres of pressure.

Oceanographers from the University of Washington and Greenland's Institute of Natural Resources tagged 14 adult narwhals with sensors and determined that the temperature of the Arctic Ocean was almost 1 degree Celsius warmer than previously thought.

In the 20th century humans slaughtered 1.5 million whales. The Sea Shepherds have stood up for whales. This year I predict The Hague will rule against Japanese entitlement and stop senseless whale slaughtering.

In 2008, 13 million people from 119 countries paid \$2.1 billion to see the whales. Around the globe, whale watching tourism is growing at 10 per cent per annum. It's time now to end the whale hunt and The War Against Nature - grant amnesty to magnificent creatures that are helping us survive on our blue planet.

Earth Dr Reese Halter is a broadcaster, distinguished biologist, and author of eight books, including The Incomparable Honeybee. View his full profile here.