Sea Shepherd's Sea Change

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The oceans need protection like never before, and the environmental organization is redefining itself. The original focus—dramatic campaigns against whalers and seal hunters operating under the flags of nations like Japan—is giving way to an emphasis on fisheries protection in cooperation with governments. Tristram Korten rides along with Peter Hammarstedt, the Swedish activist at the heart of this strategy.

On a cloudy, moonless night in Port-Gentil, Gabon, on Africa's west coast, Peter Hammarstedt watched as the red and green running lights on a pair of motorboats slid across a mangrove-fringed estuary. He clicked his two-way radio. "Keep coming," he said, guiding the rigid-hulled inflatable boats, or RHIBs, to the dock. Huddled in the dark behind the 38-year-old director of campaigns for the ocean conservation group Sea Shepherd Global were three Gabonese fisheries

officers, six Gabonese marines with AK-47's slung over their shoulders, two academic researchers, and me. After we'd all climbed in, the pilots switched off the running lights, pointed their bows west, and gunned the twin 200-horsepower engines straight into the dark.

Somewhere ahead of us drifted the *Bob Barker,* a 171-foot Sea Shepherd ship named after the late *Price Is Right* host, who'd donated $5 million a dozen years ago to purchase the vessel. The *Bob* was scheduled to run a monthslong patrol in partnership with the Gabonese government to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, or IUU fishing for short. To do this effectively, the ship's presence had to be kept secret, so the *Bob* was dark—waiting for us more than ten miles from shore with its deck lights switched off and its portholes covered. The ship's automatic identification system was off, and its crew maintained radio silence. Although we didn't see them, we'd motored past several Chinese and African fishing trawlers whose crews would have spread the word had they seen the *Bob*. Informers for the pirate networks that prowled these waters would also have relayed the *Bob*'s location. (The day before, Hammarstedt received a navy communiqué about pirate sightings to the north, off the coast of Libreville, the nation's capital.)

"It's nice to be in the boat with the guys with guns for once," Hammarstedt joked as the RHIB bounced along, its wake glowing with blue bioluminescence and Port-Gentil's lights slimming to a thin bright line off the stern. After 20 minutes speeding into the darkness, the boats slowed, and suddenly the *Bob* emerged from the gloom. Aided by headlamps, we climbed rope ladders to the darkened deck as the RHIBs were winched aboard with our gear. Hammarstedt quietly walked to the bow, patted the rust-pitted steel stanchion of the 72-year-old ship, and muttered, "Good to see you, old girl."

Hammarstedt had a long history with the *Bob;* for 11 years, he'd captained it across four oceans in pursuit of whaling boats and illegal fishing operations. But the vessel was old, and upkeep was expensive. In the end, Hammarstedt's was the lone no vote when Sea Shepherd Global's four-member board voted to scrap it in 2021. This would be its final patrol. In a few months, the crew would motor to Turkey; Hammarstedt had arranged to be there when the ship was dismantled piece by piece. A replacement had already been bought with the help of a donor. So Hammarstedt stood in the bow and let the nostalgia flow. Behind him hung the ship's brass bell, which he planned to make a keepsake of when the cutting started. Then, with a shrug, he turned and headed back. He needed his rest. There was work to be done, and it was late.

Hammarstedt (right) has helped steer Sea Shepherd away from its outlaw past. (Liam Strong/Courtesy Sea Shepherd Global)

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Hammarstedt, a rangy Swede with a youthful face and rust-colored hair, began his career at Sea Shepherd in 2002, after the International Whaling Commission voted to allow Iceland to rejoin the commission, which in turn allowed it to resume whale hunting for the supposed purpose of "scientific research," a term long seen as a loophole that allows small-scale commercial hunts to take place. At the time, Sea Shepherd was run by Paul Watson, an incendiary and divisive Canadian activist. Watson had been a founding member of Greenpeace but was kicked out of the nonprofit in 1977 after an altercation in which he forcefully took a club from a seal hunter. He established Sea Shepherd that same year, hoping to build a direct-action eco-advocacy organization that wasn't so concerned with being nice. In the ensuing decades, the group developed an outlaw reputation; Sea Shepherd crews have jammed the propellers of whaling vessels, blocked harpoon shots with their boats and bodies, and prevented ships from refueling at sea, forcing them back to port empty-handed. Watson, who has been called a terrorist by officials in both Canada and Japan, takes credit for scuttling at least nine unmanned whaling vessels from 1981 to 2002. He calls his approach "aggressive nonviolence." Sea Shepherd's ships sail under a Jolly Roger of its own design: a skull above a crossed trident and shepherd's crook.

After the IWC's 2002 vote, environmentalists were outraged. "I lost a lot of my faith that governmental bureaucracies could solve anything that day," Hammarstedt told me. Watson announced that he would sail out and confront the Icelandic ships. Hammarstedt was just 18 at the time and, thanks to his father's job in a landlocked part of Pennsylvania, had spent hardly any time on the coast, let alone at sea. But he had been looking for ways to take action ever since, at the age of 14, he saw a magazine photo of a harpooned minke whale being hauled aboard a ship. He called the Sea Shepherd offices every day for a month until they finally signed him on as a volunteer.

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Hammarstedt started with the deck crew, cleaning out the fuel tanks in the engine room. Soon he was sailing on nearly every whaling campaign Sea Shepherd engaged in. In his downtime, he studied for the officer's licenses that would qualify him to captain a ship, which he obtained a decade ago. "I saw his capabilities very early," Watson says. "He started at the bottom and was just persistent. He certainly had the energy and ambition."
Eventually, Hammarstedt rose to become the organization's director of campaigns, often functioning as the public face of Sea Shepherd. He worked closely with Watson to muster crews and decide which fisheries to target and which ships to use. Crucially, he helped garner media attention, most notably in the form of the Animal Planet series *Whale Wars*, which debuted in 2008 and documented the high-seas escapades of the Sea Shepherd fleet for seven seasons, helping to bring the organization to a new level of public exposure.

There are 15 Sea Shepherd chapters around the world, each incorporated independently to protect the organization from lawsuits. Sea Shepherd Global is the largest, with about 25 employees and 115 crew, mostly volunteers. Watson was a director of the U.S. chapter, but since about 2019 had clashed with its chairman, Pritam Singh, who wanted to focus on science and research instead of flamboyant conflict. In a statement Watson issued in July 2022, he opposed turning "our fleet away from confronting illegal poachers … and into non-controversial research vessels."

Both Watson and Hammarstedt were members of the U.S. board, and as the internal strife spilled onto social media, Sea Shepherd Global asked Watson to stop publicly criticizing the U.S. chapter. When he wouldn't—at least not to the board's satisfaction—they called on him to step down. He refused, so they voted to dismiss him. The U.S. chapter sued Watson, though Watson has since announced that he settled amicably with Singh and the chapter. Nevertheless it was a painful turn of events for Hammarstedt. "I love Paul," he told me later. "But when you join a board of directors, you take an oath to put the financial and legal well-being of the organization above all else. That can sometimes put you in conflict with family, and in this case a mentor who's like family." Now Hammarstedt finds himself helping chart a new direction for an international organization that has lost the figurehead who defined it for so many years.

Since 2016, Sea Shepherd has been partnering with governments in Africa to protect their waters against illegal fishing. (Liam Strong/Courtesy Sea Shepherd Global)

From our vantage on deck the morning after our arrival, clouds pillowed the sky and the Gulf of Guinea was flat around us. After a breakfast of a smoothie and black coffee—all meals aboard Sea Shepherd ships are vegan—Hammarstedt climbed the stairs to the bridge for a command briefing with the *Bob*'s Dutch captain, Bart Schulting, and three Gabonese fishery officers: Gaspard Mouele Ngoye, Carole Boupana, and Felisi Fridolin Ngabikoumou. They were accompanied by Jerry Strauss Massondo, a sublieutenant in charge of the six marines on board.

The image of Hammarstedt huddled with the uniformed officials was striking. It was only nine years prior that a U.S. federal judge declared that Sea Shepherd's actions were "the very embodiment of piracy" in a 2013 decision upholding an injunction to stop the organization from harassing Japanese whalers. For most of its 46-year history, public awareness of Sea Shepherd has been primarily through its work battling governments in order to draw attention to dolphin, seal, and whale hunts. But in the previous decade, the group shifted its focus heavily toward illegal fishing, largely because of need—there are half as many fish in the oceans today compared with 50 years ago—but also because its opposition to mammal hunts started to bear fruit.

In 2014, Watson was on the run from Interpol after a warrant was issued stemming from a confrontation with shark-finning fishermen in Costa Rica. (The charges have since been dropped, but a warrant from Japan is still active.) That same year, he put Hammarstedt in charge of a campaign to intercept a Japanese whaling fleet in Antarctica. To that end, Hammarstedt assembled crews and readied two ships. Meanwhile, Australia had taken Japan to the International

Court of Justice, alleging that the Japanese were violating the International Whaling Convention's ban on whale hunts. Japan, a signatory, said that its commercial hunts were allowed under the scientific-research clause. But in March 2014, The Hague ruled against Japan, which agreed to suspend whaling operations. (Japan resumed commercial whaling in 2019.)
With two ships set to go but no whalers to chase, Sea Shepherd had to pivot. Hammarstedt had heard of a Spanish fleet that was notorious for poaching toothfish—marketed as Chilean sea bass—in the waters around Antarctica. In December 2014 the *Bob,* with Hammarstedt at the helm, and the *Sam Simon* (named after *The Simpsons* cocreator, who donated the money for the ship), captained by Siddharth Chakravarty, headed south. The two captains narrowed their search for the Spanish boats by ruling out zones covered by ice and those fished by legal outfits. Within two weeks, they found the most notorious of the poaching ships, the *Thunder*.

Hammarstedt radioed the ship's captain and ordered him to cease fishing immediately. The response was essentially: By what authority? It's a question many have asked. Sea Shepherd's reply has been to invoke the United Nations World Charter for Nature, which calls on member states to "conduct their activities in recognition of the supreme importance of protecting natural systems." When in Antarctic waters, it also cites the international treaty for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources.

The reality is that Sea Shepherd has no legal authority, and its effectiveness comes down to the fact that it's willing to compel fishing operations to abide by laws that other countries have created but are unwilling or unable to enforce. The only real method to achieve this is to harass the culprits or to shame the authorities into taking action.

The researcher Teale Phelps Bondaroff, who was on board the *Bob* with me, explained over tea in the galley one day that the legal-shaming approach used against IUU fishing evolved from the moral-shaming approach that fueled anti-whaling campaigns. Countries don't want to appear unable to enforce the law in their own waters. Still, he added, critics often say that Sea Shepherd's crews, as nonstate actors, "can't legally do what they're doing. But it doesn't matter, they're doing it."

Hammarstedt's plan was simple: he would follow the *Thunder* and broadcast its location until some law-enforcement agency somewhere detained the ship. The poachers eventually made a break for it, attempting to shake their pursuers by sailing through ice fields and heavy weather. Hammarstedt was determined to follow for the duration of the mission, however long, and at one point asked his engineer and cook how much food and fuel they had. The answer: two years'

worth. Sea Shepherd looped the media in, and the chase played out in headlines across the world. The pursuit ultimately covered 10,000 miles over 110 days and is cited as the longest maritime chase in recorded history.

During this episode, Hammarstedt was in daily contact with law enforcement in several countries. He also notified officials in nations they passed by, including Gabon. Hammarstedt had heard that the explorer and conservationist Mike Fay was working with the government there.

International fishing is a complex business—owners in one country often register ships in another, obtaining what's called a flag of convenience to avoid regulations and taxes, and to more readily obtain fishing licenses in a specific country. Crews, meanwhile, generally come from places where labor is cheap. To further muddy the waters, illegal fishing boats create fake registrations and change the names of their ships frequently. The *Thunder* was registered in Nigeria but owned by a Spanish fishing tycoon.

Hammarstedt reached out to Gabon in a March 19, 2015, email that began: "For the past 92 days, I have been in physical pursuit of the internationally-wanted Nigerian-flagged poaching vessel F/V Thunder." Hammarstedt asked for Gabon's help if the ship entered its jurisdiction. Fay checked with a Gabonese admiral and replied: "No problem, keep me informed and I will get proper authorities in action if necessary."

Meanwhile, the admiral alerted Gabon's maritime allies. The net effect was to lock the *Thunder* out of nearby ports. With nowhere to go, running out of fuel and supplies, the *Thunder*'s captain scuttled his ship to destroy evidence. It sank off the island nation of São Tomé and Principe, just north of Gabon. The *Sam Simon* and *Bob Barker* rescued the crew. The captain was eventually prosecuted and found guilty, and the ship's owners were fined millions of dollars.


(Liam Strong/Courtesy Sea Shepherd Global) | The Bob Barker's crew prepares for a night patrol. (Liam Strong/Courtesy Sea Shepherd Global)

The timing was propitious for Gabon, a country of 2.4 million people and 550 miles of coastline. President Ali Bongo Ondimba had just authorized an ambitious plan to create Gabon Bleu, a series of marine reserves that needed protection against IUU fishing. But the fisheries ministry didn't have ships for the job. (In August of 2023, a group of military officers staged a coup and arrested Ondimba. They continue to hold power, and the fate of Ondimba's environmental initiatives remains unknown.)

"The national fisheries authority literally had no presence in national waters," Fay recalls. "It was like the Wild West out there." He reached out to Hammarstedt. "I said, 'Hey, can you guys come here, spend six months of the year during tuna season, and we can actually start putting a huge dent in illegal fishing in Gabonese waters?' "

Hammarstedt liked the idea. He took the proposal to Sea Shepherd Global's directors, who control the fleet. "We had some talks," says Global's CEO Alex Cornelissen, "and it came together organically. We didn't really know what to expect, though."

Once the partnership was approved, Hammarstedt wasted no time; in 2016, the *Bob* set out on patrol off Gabon with Gabonese marines. One of the first ships the crew encountered and boarded, he says, was a French trawler. The captain, in shock, said that in 15 years of fishing in the area he had never been boarded.

Word spread. Hammarstedt says Namibian officials approached him at a fisheries conference in Indonesia. Soon, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Gambia, Benin, and São Tomé and Principe—all countries without large navies—followed.

This year the Pacific nation of Tuvalu signed up. The arrangement is simple: Sea Shepherd provides the ships, the fuel, and the crew, and the host nation provides the officials and the security to enforce their fishing laws. Sea Shepherd is not paid, relying instead on donations to fund their work.

"These campaigns in Africa are Peter's brainchild," Cornelissen says. "He made them happen, and we have given him free rein."

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Sea Shepherd has three ships in rotation around the region and has participated in the seizure of dozens of illegal fishing vessels, or legal ones using illegal methods. In the seven years since the patrols began in Gabon, 15 ships have been detained, their captains arrested for illegal practices, and an untold number of fines have been issued and regulatory measures enforced—including closure of the country's shrimp fishery after patrols determined that it was dangerously underregulated.

"It has been amazing," Fay says. "We have pretty much kept illegal boats at bay."

After his dismissal, Watson told an Australian newspaper that the partnerships with nations were nothing more than "an Uber service for government bureaucrats" while also announcing the new Captain Paul Watson Foundation activist group. He's since acquired a vessel and is starting his own anti-poaching and anti-whaling campaigns.

Hammarstedt takes the slings in stride. He knows that Watson is hurt. But for him the partnerships were a no-brainer. "Working with governments, we could save one million sharks a year versus 1,000 whales," he says.

"It's excellent," says professor Daniel Pauly, one of the world's leading fisheries researchers. "And absolutely necessary for countries, otherwise their resources are stolen." He explains that one tactic ships from developed nations like Spain and Russia use in West Africa is to acquire permits to fish in one country, then illegally fish in the unpatrolled waters of a neighbor.

"Working with governments has much more value than not working with governments," says Dyhia Belhabib, a fisheries scientist with the Canadian nonprofit EcoTrust and a global authority on illegal fishing. In addition to enforcement, Sea Shepherd's partnerships provide valuable training and boost the morale of local enforcers. Still,

Belhabib worries that the effort isn't sustainable if Sea Shepherd departs the region, and that these countries need to develop strategies and infrastructure to maintain the patrols that secure their waters. "What happens when the ships leave?" she says.

But concepts like sustainability can seem like a luxury. In many countries, including Gabon, says Neil Clough, former defense attaché at the U.S. embassy in Libreville: "You do today for today" and worry about sustainability later. Clough, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, was impressed with Sea Shepherd's operation in Gabon, despite warnings from military colleagues about working with a bunch of maverick vegans. "There was a gap in Gabon's navy," Clough says. "Sea Shepherd filled that gap."

(Liam Strong/Courtesy Sea Shepherd Global)

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"If we were making arrests every night, it would mean we were not having any effect," Hammarstedt says. (Liam Strong/Courtesy Sea Shepherd Global)

The nights on the *Bob* were pleasant, capped by a good vegan dinner—ratatouille or shepherd's pie made with lentils, for instance. "Come to save the ocean and stay for the gourmet vegan food," volunteers quip. But we weren't allowed on deck after dark. The doors and portholes were sealed to avoid giving away the ship's position. An armed guard stood on pirate watch; barbed wire was coiled along the ship's gunwale to discourage unwanted guests.

Saturday night was different. At 11, we buckled on our helmets and life vests and climbed onto a deck so dark that I couldn't see the soldiers gathered at the bow. Four deck hands steadied the RHIBs as they were lowered over the side. Once the boats hit the water, we scrambled down the ladder and sped away from the *Bob*. More than 12 miles into the open ocean, the pilots eased up on the throttle and waited to see if the small-boat radar picked up anything.

Off in the distance we could see a Chinese trawler, but the Gabonese officers made the decision to approach in the morning while it was fishing. Hammarstedt was next to me in the RHIB's bow as we rocked gently in a holding pattern. Times like this, he said, made him realize how lucky he is. I wondered if he meant the job at hand or the freedom of being untethered at sea in the blue-black night. Maybe both. One of the Gabonese officers told me he missed the patrols when he went home. "It's the only time I feel totally free," he said.

We didn't find any other suspicious ships that night, but in the morning we headed for the trawler we'd spotted earlier. It was flagged to Gabon and had a license to fish. We motored up and the trawler dropped a ladder. The ship was squalid and rusty, the deck slick with fish entrails. The Indonesian crew crouched over a quivering mass of flesh

dumped onto the deck, sorting the catch. Hammarstedt watched the inspection from a distance. After scouring the records on the bridge, Ngoye determined that the paperwork was in order, but he was concerned about the amount of shrimp in the holds. The trawler wasn't licensed for shrimp, but it was allowed to keep any bycatch. The proportions were off, though—more shrimp than you'd expect from bycatch. Still, there were no obvious violations, so Ngoye made a note to recommend that the ratio of bycatch be specified.

A couple of days later we boarded an immense Spanish purse seiner, a fishing boat that deploys large nets to capture an entire school at once. Its bridge sparkled with the latest electronic instruments and a polished wood floor. The crew, from Ghana, Senegal, and elsewhere across Africa, wore white hard hats and matching boots. When one of the nets came up, small tuna and bonito dropped down a chute to a conveyor belt for sorting into refrigerated holds. There was a tender boat on board used to check on the fish-aggregating devices—a.k.a. FADs, free-floating objects placed in the water that act like artificial reefs, allowing for plant growth that attracts smaller fish like herring, which in turn attract bigger fish like tuna. Ships like this can use hundreds of FADs each year, although they must be licensed to do so by the country they're fishing in.

Conservationists are concerned that FADs attract juvenile tuna, perhaps to rest while migrating, so the catches inordinately cull young tuna before they've had a chance to reproduce. Given the number of FADs and the size of the ships using them, the impact is significant.

They're "definitely one of the most destructive things out here," Hammarstedt said as we walked the deck. The only violation the fisheries officers found were missing logs for two of the ship's 45 FADs. Otherwise it was clean. After our four-hour inspection, we motored back to the *Bob*.

We boarded three more ships in the two weeks I was with the *Bob*. There were no arrests or serious violations, so in that sense it was dully uneventful. Any poachers had made themselves scarce. But that was the point. After seven years and busts of more than a dozen ships, word was out: don't mess around in Gabon's waters.

In a pep talk to the crew one morning, Hammarstedt said as much. "If we were making arrests every night, it would mean we were not having any effect," he said. In a paper for the U.S. Naval War College's Center on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups, naval historian Claude Berube noted that Sea Shepherd's recent

successes are leading to “a period of growing legitimization in which larger campaigns are conducted in concert with nation states.”
Hammarstedt is busy forging that future, in constant motion to meet ministers in different countries and to secure funding. He had an upcoming fundraising tour scheduled in Italy, followed by a trip to renew the agreement in Namibia. So on a clear sunny morning, he brought his bags topside and said goodbye to the Gabonese officers and the Sea Shepherd crew, then clambered down the rope ladder. As the RHIB sped away, he allowed himself a glance back at the *Bob*. There was a lot of history there. Soon it was out of sight, and he kept his eyes focused ahead, past the oil tankers and cargo ships, past the moored purse seiners and trawlers, past the politics and personal dramas, to where Libreville’s skyline finally hove into view.

Link: https://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/environment/sea-shepherd/