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Ryan Tucker Jones

When Environmentalists Crossed the Strait: Subsistence Whalers, Hippies, and the Soviets

When did the modern environmentalist movement and Indigenous peoples part ways? And what were the issues and events that separated them? Any answer to these questions must seriously consider the history of whaling in the Pacific. For, in the early 1980s, difficult questions about environmentalism's emerging relationship to Indigenous whaling came into focus in the North Pacific's Bering Strait. In 1981, the renegade environmentalist organization Sea Shepherd landed zodiacs at the Soviet Chukchi village of Lorino, attempting to prove that the whaling station there was illegally using whale meat to feed fox farms. Two years later, Greenpeace did the same thing. The actions brought international attention to the environmentalists, but no change to whaling there. Instead, the real changes occurred along unexpected lines of conflict. The protests outraged Alaska Natives, who felt called to defend Indigenous whaling and feared the protests would endanger the reestablishment of cross-Strait links with Yupik and Chukchi. For their part, both Sea Shepherd and Greenpeace redefined their stance on Indigenous whaling, though in opposite directions. As in much of the Pacific, then, the Bering Strait and its whales both connected and pushed humans apart.

The Bering Sea coast of Siberia is home to some of the world's largest whale populations, as well as one of the world's longest whaling traditions. Chukchi, Iñupiat, and Yupik people there have killed bowhead and gray whales for millennia. In the late nineteenth century, however, Yankee whalers decimated whale populations—as Bathsheba Demuth describes in this volume. The loss of whales hurt Indigenous subsistence, but some Chukchi in particular benefitted from the American trade. Adopting motorized boats and harpoon guns, they sold whale and other products for firearms, alcohol, and food. This trade continued after the Bolshevik Revolution, even though the Soviets redoubled efforts to prohibit it.

This history confounds simple notions of Indigenous whaling; Chukchi had adopted motorized vehicles of their own volition, and they had contributed at least some small, but significant, part to the destruction of the North Pacific's whales. The next few decades would further muddy these definitions. When the Soviet Union hardened its grip on the Arctic, it began its own industrial whaling venture in the area. The Russians were aware that their

own whaling might harm their Indigenous subjects, and thus made sure to leave some of the meat for local use. When the Soviet Union joined the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1946, it ensured that the Commission's charter allowed so-called "aboriginal whaling" with industrial technology, a significant expansion of the idea of subsistence hunting. From 1956, Indigenous Siberians used modern diesel catcher boats to increase the take, to up to 194 whales per year. These were now entirely gray whales, as bowhead whale numbers had fallen too low to allow any take. In 1969, the Soviets resumed whaling on behalf of Indigenous Siberians, supposedly to reduce the number of harpooned whales lost and wasted.

Chukchi and Yupik responses, though, were mixed. Some resented the fact that they no longer whaled themselves, in the process losing traditional skills and communal focus. Others welcomed this kind of modernization, happy to have a reliable supply of whale meat deposited on shore every year, along with the full employment that came with the fox farms that began springing up along the Bering Sea coast, fed by excess whale products. This last development was not mentioned in Soviet reports to the IWC. It would, however, directly trigger the madness that would hit the Bering Strait in the early 1980s.

Environmentalists, who had become a standing presence at the IWC by the late 1970s, took note of the increasing catches of gray whales and wondered how they could constitute aboriginal subsistence. They calculated that the average family on the Chukchi Peninsula, to use up the whales, would be required to consume something like 10 tons of whale meat per year. At the time, few environmentalists considered their anti-whaling stance problematic for Indigenous communities. Hints of trouble appeared in 1977, when Greenpeace was unsure how to deal with US support for the continuation of a subsistence quota granted to Alaska Natives.¹ Greenpeace's anti-Soviet whaling campaigns of the 1970s had been wildly successful, bringing environmentalism into the global consciousness and winning them support from First Nations in Canada and the United States. But the Bering Strait would bring some unexamined contradictions to the fore.

1 "Alaska Whales and Whaling," *Alaska Geographic* 5:4 (1978), 142.

Sea Shepherd Lands in Lorino

Paul Watson, who had taken part in Greenpeace's protests of Soviet whalers in the North Pacific in the 1970s but had since formed his own splinter organization, Sea Shepherd, learned of the Siberian hunt while attending the 1980 IWC meeting. Since the Soviets refused to allow international inspectors into Siberia, Watson decided to go there himself, hoping to provoke an international incident. As the Bering Strait was one of the most fiercely guarded borders in the Cold War world, this was a very bold decision.

The fact that this voyage would enter Soviet territory was only one key difference from the earlier anti-whaling campaigns. Watson's voyage also appeared aimed, potentially, against subsistence whalers like the Chukchi. This latter aspect almost immediately provoked tensions when the Sea Shepherd crew arrived in Nome, Alaska, to ready for their trip across the Strait. There, Native whalers had been involved in their own controversy since the IWC's 1977 attempt to shut down their subsistence bowhead hunt. Because of their historical ties across the Strait, they took Sea Shepherd's mission as a challenge to all subsistence hunting. Watson arranged a meeting with Native whaling leaders to soothe tensions, but despite a promising start, this only increased the divide between them. During the conversations, Watson took issue with one Native whaler's claim to respect whales: "Maybe, maybe not . . . But I do know that if you are sincere about your respect for the whale then you are obligated to respect us, for we are protectors and defenders of whales."² Watson's words crystallized two thrusts of environmentalists' attitudes towards whales. They prioritized the animals' survival over humans' uses of whales and claimed to understand the creatures better than any other humans could. These were ideas crafted to combat modern industrial whalers' practices and ideas, but in the Bering Strait, they met a very different set of values and uses.

Sea Shepherd left Nome on 9 August 1981 and landed its zodiacs at the Siberian village of Lorino later that day, taking the Soviets by surprise. On shore, they observed a small "Mongolian" village and a mink farm. Watson described the scene: "Piles of fresh whale meat littered the area with some very un-aboriginal-type women employed with hacking the hunks of meat into smaller pieces with some mean-looking flensing knives. We were close enough to see their blondish hair and back with bandanas and to notice some of them had

2 Paul Watson, *Ocean Warrior: My Battle to End the Illegal Slaughter on the High Seas* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1996). 66–68.

blue eyes. So much for the aboriginal justification for the hunt.”³ Interestingly, Watson’s words suggest he was not at this time opposed on principle to Indigenous whaling.

As soon as the locals realized that these were not Soviet scientists, they apparently called the military, which soon arrived in helicopters. When the environmentalists retreated, film in hand, the Soviets hurried out in a military ship to intercept them and demand surrender. At the crucial moment, when it seemed the Soviets might fire, Watson reported that a gray whale suddenly surfaced between the ships. The Soviets retreated (Watson thanked the whale) and the Sea Shepherd was free. A scattering of media outlets picked up the story and then it dropped from consciousness.

Greenpeace across the Strait

Feeling that Sea Shepherd had failed to draw sufficient attention to illegal whaling, in 1983 Greenpeace decided to repeat Watson’s daring incursion. Like Sea Shepherd, the Greenpeace activists managed to land in Lorino undetected. They spotted the mink farm, and while the camera operator rolled video from offshore, they handed out leaflets in Russian explaining their purpose there. One “Eskimo . . . tore up a leaflet.”⁴ After about a half hour, the military arrived. They told Chris Cook, leader of the expedition, to bring the other members ashore. Cook motioned for them to land, while at the same time shouting in English for them to leave and hurry back to Nome with their footage. Cook and several others were arrested and flown by helicopter to a detention center.

Meanwhile, the *Rainbow Warrior* had escaped, and dictated its story over the wires to the international press. It soon ran on major news stations around the country and world. The media presence grew when they learned seven protesters were imprisoned in Siberia and threatened with 20 years imprisonment.⁵ When the protestors were released after just seven days, their mission to all appearances seemed a roaring success.

However, Greenpeace’s reception in Nome was nearly as hostile as it had been in Siberia. They had stepped straight into the volatile politics of Alaska while trying to make a point

3 Quoted in David Day, *The Whale War* (London: Grafton, 1992), 74.

4 Richard Mauer, “On Board the Rainbow Warrior: Seven Tell Tale of Siberian Captivity,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 26, 1983.

5 Rick Dawson, “The Russian Grey Whale Campaign, July 1983,” (personal collection of the author), np.

about the Soviet Union. One of the basic problems was that they did not recognize the connections that existed across the Bering Strait, connections which were experiencing a revival at that very moment. Jenny Alow, who was originally from Gambell but was now living at Nome, and who was well-connected with other Arctic Indigenous activists, sent an angry letter to *Rainbow Warrior*, accusing it of “jeopardizing efforts to re-establish contact between the Chukchis of Siberia and Eskimos in Western Alaska.” Alona feared that with such a brazen violation of Soviet sovereignty, they would mistrust American intentions. “Don’t you consider the local people or what they might say[?]” Alona asked, “we want to share stories [with the Chukchis], laugh, and regain our ties to them.”⁶ Greenpeace representatives claimed, “The Soviets could not possibly see any connection between the Eskimos of Alaska and an international group based in England.”⁷ But of course the Soviets had not seen Greenpeace as this, but rather as closely connected to the American government.

Greenpeace’s protest against whaling was ill defined enough that it seemed to present a threat to Alaskans’ rights to do the same. Letters to the editor of the *Nome Nugget* reveal the scale of the suspicion: As one reader wrote, Greenpeace “made an illegal entry in the Soviet Union hell-bent-for-leather to stop commercial whaling. They tell us they aren’t against subsistence whaling—at least not for now. Yet they have very little concept of what subsistence involves.”⁸ My interviews with former Greenpeacers suggest that this was true—they had not given subsistence whaling much, if any, thought. As one crewmember, Nancy Higgins admitted after the campaign, “I understand [the importance of whaling to them] much more than I did. . . . We have to respect human rights as well as the rights of whales. I don’t know what the answer is in terms of the whales, but I do know that the whale is very important for those people to live.”⁹ While the environmentalists had succeeded in drawing global attention to the Soviet fur farms, they had opened up real rifts with Native Alaskans.

Ironically, even as the Sea Shepherd and Greenpeace campaigns succeeded in documenting the use of whale meat for mink food, the IWC was again re-defining aboriginal subsistence whaling in ways that might make these revelations irrelevant. In 1980, an IWC Working Group significantly broadened its definition of aboriginal subsistence whaling

6 *Nome Nugget*, July 28, 1983.

7 *Nome Nugget*, July 28, 1983.

8 *Nome Nugget*, July 28, 1983.

9 *Nome Nugget*, July 28, 1983.

as “for the purposes of aboriginal consumption carried out by or on behalf of aboriginal, indigenous or native people . . . [for] meeting their nutritional, subsistence or cultural requirements. This term includes trade in items which are by-products of subsistence catches.”¹⁰ Both aspects of Soviet whaling—the use of modernized, non-Indigenous whaling boats and the use of whale meat to feed minks—might fit these broader parameters. As a result, the IWC did not sanction the Soviets, even after the environmentalists’ actions.

Bering Strait Fallout

Even if these twin campaigns failed in their ultimate aims, they left an impact. Greenpeace was spurred by its unforeseen conflicts with Alaska Natives to soften its opposition to subsistence whaling. Greenpeace declined to oppose the Makah’s 1996 resumption of the grey whale hunt. Watson, on the other hand, organized the main protest. His stance hardening, he would later write, “The aboriginal hunter barter a part of his soul with every spent bullet.”¹¹ Soon, Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd were clashing openly over Greenpeace’s support for subsistence whaling on Alaska’s St. Lawrence Island. That year Greenpeace activists used two of their zodiacs—famous as anti-whaling protest vessels—to help a Yupik crew tow a dead bowhead whale to shore. Thus, in 1997, Watson declared Greenpeace pirate whalers and announced that he considered their boats acceptable targets for sinking. This rift has not yet healed.

Outcomes in the Bering Strait were perhaps just as important. Despite the fears, the environmentalists did not derail relations across the Strait. Though no one knew it at the time, the Soviet Union was not long for the world. When it disintegrated in 1991, the Soviets stopped whaling in the Bering Sea. Moscow also ended subsidies to Chukotka, and a real humanitarian crisis emerged. Chukchi and Iñupiat fell back on whaling to feed themselves, but most had forgotten the necessary skills after thirty years of relying on Russian support. In their stead arrived Alaska Natives, who traveled across the Strait to re-teach their long-lost brethren to kill whales and so avert starvation. The ancient links across the Bering Strait, which the environmentalists had inadvertently helped reveal and even reinforce, continued to operate through the same whales that had always crossed and re-crossed those narrow waters.

10 Quoted in Ray Gambell, “International Management of Whales and Whaling: An Historical Review of the Regulation of Commercial and Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling,” *Arctic* 46, no. 2 (June, 1993): 97–107, here 104.

11 Watson, *Ocean Warrior*, 43.

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