

Anti-whaling activists have conviction and courage

Don Anton interviewed (*The Daily Telegraph*)

By Michelle Cazzulino

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COVERED in blood, adrift in icy water and inhaling a sickening mixture of sea salt and whale blubber, Greenpeace campaigner Texas Joe Constantine waits for rescue.

It arrives after several agonising minutes that provide just enough time for Constantine to contemplate exactly how close he and his party have come to death.

This is life on the high seas, where the stakes in the annual cat-and-mouse game between Japanese whalers and environmental activists are as vast as the mammals they are, respectively, hunting and protecting.

On this occasion - January 14, 2006 - Constantine will escape with his life. In time, he will recall the dramatic series of events leading to him being catapulted overboard: "We were out defending the whales. I was driving our boat and we were in a good position and the whaler fired its harpoon," he said.

"All of a sudden the harpoon line came down on us trapping us between the whale and the catcher. The line came tight at that point and threw me from the boat into the water. It was a few minutes before our boat was able to come over and pick me up."

The near-death experience might have been sufficient to compel Constantine to rethink environmental activism as a pastime, but the Canadian remains as passionately opposed to whaling today as he was two years ago.

He is, however, uniquely placed to appreciate the dangers that campaigners face when they take their protests to the Japanese in the form of what educators refer to as "direct action".

With two activists from environmental group Sea Shepherd - Australian Benjamin Potts and his British crewmate Giles Lane - taken hostage by whaler Yushin Maru No. 2 on Tuesday night, the issue has again hit the headlines.

It has also sparked debate about the effectiveness of the men's actions. While some argue they are helping to prevent the barbaric slaughter of whales, others have accused them of being all passion, at the expense of common sense.

Fisheries governance expert Dr Kate Barclay from the University of Technology, Sydney, has reservations about whether boarding the boat was the most sensible course of action.

"They say their aim is to stop Japanese whaling, but I don't see that their tactics are at all effective," she said.

"Despite the media furore here, it's never covered by the media in Japan. Japanese people on the whole are not aware that it's a controversial issue or that it affects Japanese reputation overseas.

"Whaling is presented as being a huge part of the national psyche by a small but vocal group of pro-whaling people within the Japanese Government, but most Japanese people don't think about it all and only some eat a very small amount of the meat occasionally."

Aside from its effect on Japanese public opinion, the Sea Shepherd stunt carried considerable cost (which is believed to have run into millions of dollars) and considerable risk.

But activism educator James Whelan from The Change Agency argues that the pay-off cannot be underestimated either.

"(Federal Environment Minister) Stephen Smith and a whole lot of others are inevitably going to be feeling the heat of public attention by virtue of this," he said.

"(The activists) wouldn't be doing this if they hadn't exhausted all the other opportunities and weren't absolutely convinced that this is what was needed.

"Will it be effective? Australia only banned whaling here in my lifetime and it primarily banned it because of actions like this."

Dr Pete Hay from the University of Technology believes the majority of Australians will support the actions of the protesters.

"There is so much support in this country for ending Japanese whaling that that in itself makes these sorts of in-your-face, provocative acts acceptable in a way that wouldn't have been the case if the community was more divided."

Maritime law experts yesterday warned that, although the protesters might be morally right, they could have a legal case to answer.

"What the Sea Shepherd individuals did in boarding the boat without permission is illegal," Donald Anton from the Australian National University said.

Dr Sam Bateman from the University of Wollongong agrees: "The rights to board another vessel are quite clearly defined and those rights only go to a government vessel and of course, the Yushu Maru No. 2 is not a government vessel," he said.

"In a far-fetched situation, the Japanese could hold (the protesters) until they got back to Japan, where they could be prosecuted."

Bobbi Allan from social change group Stillness in Action believes the protesters will emerge morally unscathed from the incident.

"This particular action had to be this way because how else would you make it visual? It's them presenting a letter, not through the proper channels, but it was a non-violent action," she said.

"The Government has called the action extremely provocative, but I don't think jumping on a ship and delivering a letter is any more provocative than what the Japanese are doing".

W: <http://www.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/story/0,22049,23063840-5001031,00.html>