

Activists launch annual whale campaign in Australia

November 5 2012



Anti-whaling activists began their annual campaign against Japanese whalers Monday with the Sea Shepherd's flagship, the Steve Irwin, pictured here in September 2012, leaving its Melbourne dock to pursue the harpoonists.

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The group's ninth campaign, named Operation Zero Tolerance, is its

largest against Japan's whale hunt and involves four ships, a helicopter, three drones and more than 100 crew members.

"It feels really amazing on a personal front... to be taking the flagship off," the Steve Irwin's Indian captain Siddharth Chakravarty told AFP after the vessel had left dock and was preparing to head out to sea.

The campaign has begun earlier than previous years, with [Sea Shepherd Conservation Society](#) boats planning to journey to the North Pacific off Japan to engage the whalers, rather than waiting for them to enter [Antarctic waters](#).

"The mission this year is to intercept them as soon as they can... to stop them from killing a single whale this year," Sea Shepherd Australian director Jeff Hansen told AFP.

[Commercial whaling](#) is banned under an international treaty. But Japan has since 1987 used a loophole authorising whaling for scientific research—a practice condemned by environmentalists and anti-whaling nations.



Militant conservationist and Sea Shepherd founder Paul Watson is pictured at a demonstration in May 2012. Anti-whaling activists began their annual campaign against Japanese whalers Monday with the Sea Shepherd's flagship, the Steve Irwin, leaving its Melbourne dock to pursue the harpoonists.

Militant conservationist and Sea Shepherd founder Paul Watson has also vowed to join this year's efforts despite an Interpol notice for his arrest.

Watson's whereabouts are unknown and it is not clear which vessel he plans to captain, given that Chakravarty has the Steve Irwin and Sweden's Peter Hammarstedt will skipper the Bob Barker.

In addition to the three known vessels, which also include the Brigitte Bardot, Sea Shepherd will reveal its mystery fourth vessel once the Japanese fleet departs on its mission, Hansen said.

The fourth ship has been named the Sam Simon after the American television producer best known for "The Simpsons", who donated the funds to buy the vessel formerly owned by the German government.

"I wish I could elaborate on the ship but until it is secured, outfitted, and ready for Whale Wars, that information has to remain classified," Watson wrote on the Sea Shepherd website in June.

"What I can say is that former German-government-owned ships are meticulously maintained and kept in good running order."

Sea Shepherd plans to deploy the Sam Simon in the Southern Ocean where it will wait for the whaling fleet and be in place in case the Japanese elude the activists' other ships.

Watson, who for years has harassed Japan's whale hunt, was arrested in Germany in May for extradition to Costa Rica over a shark finning incident in 2002. The Canadian national has not been seen since he skipped bail in July.

The Japanese whalers usually set off around December, with Sea Shepherd ships departing Australia to harass them in the Southern Ocean soon afterwards.

Angry confrontations have over the years included a collision which resulted in the loss of a [Sea Shepherd](#) ship, without loss of life, and stink bombs being lobbed at the Japanese whaling vessels.

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