



The War of the Whales and the Sandpipers

Marshall Islands

The sandpiper had been running for some time, hurrying up and down the beach, following the retreat of each wave, trying to peck some sea flea or, better still, some small fish, then fleeing with the arrival of each new wave. Every morning, he liked to immerse himself into this routine of coming and going across the sand, because it gave him the feeling of performing a graceful dance with the surf.

His friend the whale, who was in the bay facing the beach, watched the sandpiper with a disdainful gaze. She was in a bad mood because, on her last outing to breathe, a tern had dropped a huge plop of excrement right onto one of her eyes.

‘Damn birds!’ she had exclaimed. ‘Why don’t they look first before they drop their rubbish?’

The fact was that the sandpiper was now the focus of the whale’s anger.

‘Hey, Sandpiper! Stop eating the things belonging to the ocean and eat only what the air gives you!’ she snapped at him. ‘Since humans put those huge boats in the sea, we do not have so much krill or plankton to eat, and we water creatures need everything that grows in the ocean to survive.’

The sandpiper was offended to hear his friend talk like that.

‘Why do you get like that?’ he replied. ‘The ocean is not yours, it belongs to no one, not to you, not to me, not to the humans. I have as much right as you to feed on what the ocean offers.’

‘No!’ shouted the whale. ‘Ocean belongs to whales!’

‘What are you saying? If the ocean had to belong to someone, it would belong to us more than to whales. There are more sandpipers than whales.’

‘What do you mean, there are more sandpipers than whales?’ replied the whale contemptuously, squinting an eye and twisting her mouth. ‘Where did you get that from? There are many more whales than sandpipers!’

‘Are you suuuuure?’ the sandpiper answered mockingly and provokingly. ‘Show me!’

‘Yes! I’m going to show you!’

The whale submerged under the water, striking the surface of the sea with her huge tail, and began to sing a high-pitched and mysterious song, which travelled the oceans in all directions. Whales came from all corners of the world. They came from the east, they came from the west, they came from the north and from the south. They kept coming until the ocean surrounding the island was so full of whales that a sandpiper could walk from back to back for hundreds of miles without sinking into the sea.

The sandpiper’s eyes grew wide over such an invasion of whales, but, not wanting to give up, he soared to heaven and began to call his sandpiper brothers and sisters with his high-pitched voice ... Peep ... Peep ...

Soon after, the rustle of hundreds of thousands of wings could be heard and birds filled the sky. They came from the east, they came from the west, they came from the north and south, until the island was covered with birds and feathers, hiding the beaches and palm trees beneath them.

But, how would one figure out if there were more whales or more sandpipers? It was impossible to know!

‘Why do not we call on our cousins in the oceans to settle this dispute?’ said the whales, who wanted to prevail at all costs.

So they sank into the ocean and called the dolphins and killer whales, the porpoises and the seals, even some fish came, the sharks, tunas, hammerheads, swordfishes and manta rays. They came from the east and they came from the west, from the north and the south, from all the seas, until the ocean was filled with the cousins of the whales.

The sandpipers, shocked by this scene, many of them even afraid, decided to do the same. So they called their cousins the gulls and terns, herons and cranes, pelicans, cormorants, fulmars, razorbills, skuas and guillemots, even the small and tender puffins. They came from the east and they came from the west, from the north and the south, and, after covering the nearby islands and filling the sky over the seas, there was a hair-raising din of peeps and chirps and cries and caws.

But, how to figure out who was more numerous, the whales and their cousins and the fish, or the sandpipers and the birds? It was impossible to know!

However, the whale was not willing to allow those deafening birds, one of which had pooped her eye, to prevail over her and her relatives.

‘Let’s eat the land!’ she yelled to be heard over the birds’ shouting. ‘So they will not have a place to rest. When they get tired of flying, they will end up drowning.’

And the whales, the dolphins, the killer whales, the sharks and the rest of the fish began to eat the beaches, including the nests of the birds, and then they began to tear down the palm trees and eat them, while ...

‘Quick! Let’s drink the ocean before they leave us without land!’ the sandpiper cried to his sisters and cousins, the birds. ‘In this way, they will run out of water and suffocate under the sun.’

And the birds, all at once, swooped down, dipped their beaks into the sea, and began to sip the ocean. Since it was easier to suck and swallow than to chew, the birds drank all the oceans of the planet and left the whales and their relatives gasping in the dry seabed. They no

longer scolded the birds. They were just trying to survive, as they suffocated out of their natural element.

Yes, the birds had won, but ...

The islands, with their exuberant vegetation, had been greatly reduced in size, and now a gigantic desert of dry and lifeless seabed lay before them. And what was going to happen to all those marine creatures, that the sandpiper and his seabird relatives needed to feed on? They were also going to die, and then the birds would not have anything to eat, and they would die too. But what most distressed the sandpiper, was to see his friend Whale becoming crushed under her own weight on the dry bottom of what had been the sea. No, he did not want that! He and Whale had gone too far in their arrogant dispute.

‘We’ve made a mistake!’ he shouted, finally aware of what they had done. ‘If we do not return water to the ocean soon, we will die too, because we will not have anything to feed on ourselves.’

‘Quick!’ he ordered. ‘Regurgitate all the water you have drunk! We have to help all the beings of the ocean to survive!’

And sandpipers, gulls and terns, herons and cranes, pelicans, cormorants and others, even the little puffins, began to regurgitate the salty waters of the ocean until, shortly after, the whales and their cousins, and all marine beings, swam under the waves.

‘Return the land from the islands to the birds,’ the whale softly whispered under the waves to the rest of her sisters, brothers and cousins. ‘We should not have been seized by anger in this way.’

And everything in the ocean and on the islands returned to its original state. The breeze blew again on the seashores, and the sun shone again on the crests of the waves and on the edges of the palm leaves.

‘I’m sorry,’ the sandpiper said to the whale, speaking into her ear, for he had landed on her back to make sure she was well. ‘I should not have gone so far in this stupid argument.’

‘I’m sorrier,’ the whale replied, ‘that I turned my anger on you and on all the birds for what was a simple joke of fate. Not only have we,

birds and sea mammals and fish, put ourselves in danger, but we have endangered the entire planet, and the current and future generations of all the beings that inhabit it.’

‘But the point,’ she added with a half smile, ‘is that we will never know if there are more whales or more sandpipers, if there are more birds or more creatures of the ocean. The important thing is that we know there are enough of both to ensure the balance of oceans and land, and the welfare of all the species that share the Earth.’

‘So be it,’ replied the sandpiper. But after a pause, he added with a mischievous look: ‘But there are more sandpipers than whales!’

And the whale and the sandpiper exploded in loud, and high-pitched, giggles. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2019).

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Comments

This is a story that has a lot to share about interdependence between the elements of systems, and that illustrates the process whereby conflicts escalate, with unforeseen consequences.

Unfortunately, the Marshall Islands, called by the Spaniards in the 16th century *Islas de los Pintados* (Islands of the Painted Ones, due to the custom of natives to tattoo their bodies), were dominated by foreign powers –Spaniards, British and Germans, Japanese, Americans– until their independence in 1990. Not only that: between 1946 and 1958, the United States of America carried out 67 nuclear bomb tests on its atolls. It is, therefore, even more poignant to find a story about the cultivation of interdependence and peace from a land and a people that have been mistreated by imperial powers and hot-stamped by nuclear horror.

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: The Challenges Ahead.- The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life.

Principle 6c: Ensure that decision making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities.

The Way Forward: This requires a change of mind and heart. It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility. We must imaginatively develop and apply the vision of a sustainable way of life locally, nationally, regionally, and globally.