



The Whale that Started the Green Movement

In 1966, a beluga whale swam the wrong way up the Rhine—and wound up paving the way for environmental reform in Germany. BY MICHAEL WARD

When world war II finally came to an end, Germany was in shambles. Its cities had been transformed into forests of twisted steel and broken concrete, and the German people were suffering from food shortages and rampant unemployment. Within a few years, however, things were looking up. Production of steel and coal were fueling remarkable growth in West Germany, and the country was positioning itself as the industrial powerhouse of Europe.

But this “economic miracle” was wreaking havoc on the environment. Careless mining and manufacturing turned the Rhine into what amounted to an open sewer, and soon, the international waterway contained millions of gallons of toxic waste. By the 1960s, the river was striped with red and green streaks of sludge. The water’s oxygen levels had plummeted, and fish were dying en masse. Germans tolerated the pollution because food, jobs, and a sense of progress came along with it; but everyone knew that something had to change.

The catalyst for that change appeared unexpectedly on the morning of May 18, 1966, when a fisherman on the Rhine spotted a large, white creature swimming alongside his boat. Dr. Wolfgang Gewalt, director of the nearby Duisburg Zoo, was called in to identify the animal, which he recognized as a beluga whale. Intrigued, Dr. Gewalt quickly put together a team of whale hunters to trap

the animal and bring it to his aquarium.

That was easier said than done. For all his expertise, Gewalt had little idea how to capture a whale without harming it. He tried trapping the animal using tennis nets, but the whale swam right through them. Several more failed attempts followed, and the whale began to garner more and more attention. Before long, the newspapers had nicknamed him Moby Dick. But as the German people continued to watch Dr. Gewalt’s attempts to capture the whale, it became impossible to ignore the unfortunate side effects of post-war progress. As Moby Dick proceeded to swim up the Rhine, journalists noted that the whale’s skin went from soft and white to bumpy and splotchy. Concerned citizens began to fear that the river’s water would harm the animal, if not kill it outright.

After a couple of weeks, Moby Dick finally left the Duisburg area and traveled downriver. It was only a few yards from the North Sea when a strange thing happened. The whale suddenly stopped, turned around, and went back upriver. A few days later, Moby Dick appeared outside the German parliament building in Bonn—150 miles north.

This caused quite a scene. Hundreds of onlookers gathered at the river, and a group of nearby politicians even suspended their

NATO news conference so they could get a glimpse at the whale. Meanwhile, the press went wild, with newspapers suggesting that Moby Dick’s plan all along had been to raise awareness of the environmental plight of the Rhine.

Although the whale eventually escaped to open water, its presence remained. For four weeks in 1966, Moby Dick captured the nation’s attention and highlighted the country’s ecological desperation. Not coincidentally, environmental politics soon became a pressing national issue. The German people began forming grassroots organizations, and in 1972, the influential Federal Association of Citizens’ Initiatives for Environmental Protection was formed. That same year, the German parliament passed the first two laws that effectively regulated waste disposal and emissions in rivers. And

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in 1979, Germans formed the first successful political party to focus on ecological concerns, Die Grünen Partei, literally “the Green Party.” It’s from their name that we get the term “green politics.”

Today, the Rhine is the cleanest it’s been in decades. Germany is still an industrial powerhouse, but it’s also one of the most eco-friendly countries in the world. Yet, the river might still be a sewer today if it hadn’t been for one lost whale that tested the waters.