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From: Audrey McAvoy, Associated Press
Published May 17, 2007 12:00 AM

Environmental Groups Sue U.S. Navy Over Sonar Exercises off Hawaii

HONOLULU -- Five [environmental groups](#) is suing the Navy over sonar exercises off the coast of Hawaii that they say harm whales.

Earthjustice filed the lawsuit in federal court in Honolulu on Wednesday, citing studies saying Navy sonar can "kill, injure, or significantly alter the behavior of whales and dolphins."

The groups, which also include the Ocean Mammal Institute and the Animal Welfare Institute, want the court to prohibit naval sonar exercises near Hawaii until sailors adopt measures to protect [marine mammals](#).

The suit says the Navy plans a series of up to 12 anti-submarine warfare exercises off Hawaii through next year.

Paul Achitoff, the lead Earthjustice attorney for the case, said other organizations had lawsuits challenging anti-submarine warfare exercises in other areas but this was the only case seeking to force the Navy to change the way it conducts drills off Hawaii.

A Navy spokesman said the service was complying with all applicable laws and regulations, adding sailors have used active sonar in two undersea warfare exercises in the islands since January without incident.

Sailors use active sonar by pumping sound waves through the ocean and listening to the echo as it bounces off underwater objects. It is a key technology for finding enemy submarines, a top priority for today's U.S. Navy as more nations are using quieter and harder-to-detect submarines.

But scientists say sonar may mask the echoes some whales and [dolphins](#) listen for when they use their own natural sonar to locate food. Navy sonar may also startle some species, in particular beaked whales, prompting them to rush to the surface.

There is evidence that this gives them a form of "bends," the decompression sickness human divers get when they surface too fast.

A National [Oceanic](#) and Atmospheric Administration study said the Navy's use of sonar contributed to the beaching of 16 whales and two dolphins in the Bahamas in 2000.

Eight of those [whales](#) died, showing hemorrhaging around their brains and ear bones, possibly because they were exposed to loud noise.

On the Net:

Earthjustice: <http://earthjustice.org/>

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