Navy plan would turn Pacific Coast into firing range

By CAROL VAN STRUM

The Bush Administration will haunt this nation for many years. Among its most egregious and devious legacies was a 2007 proposal to expand US Navy control over territorial waters beyond Puget Sound in Washington to include the entire coast of Oregon as well as part of northern California. This plan was effectively concealed from public view to the extent that to this day very few Oregonians know about it, much less the rest of the country. And because no one knew about it, no objections were raised and the plan is well on the way to execution.

A plan by the Navy, left over from the Bush administration, would turn this beautiful Oregon coastline into a military zone. Photo by University of Oregon.

The Navy has had a strong presence and active training grounds in the Puget Sound area since World War II, and the economy of Washington is in many ways dependent on military funding, directly and indirectly. Oregon has no Navy bases and has little or no military funding except for the notorious Army chemical weapons depot in Umatilla. Oregon’s coastal waters have long been a valuable resource for fishing, tourism, sports, recreation and wildlife preservation, with almost no military presence or activity.

In July 2007, the Navy published notice in the Federal Register of its intent to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) on its proposal to expand its Puget Sound activities down the coastline to northern California. Those activities include extensive air combat maneuvers, missile and gunnery exercises, antisubmarine warfare exercises, electronic combat exercises, mine countermeasures (including underwater “training” minefields), intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations and extensive unmanned aerial systems operations (i.e., drones), in an area of ocean from the coastline to beyond the 12-mile territorial limit. During its activities in these waters the Navy could prohibit entry into its training or exercise area. The excuse for pre-empting commercial fishing, tourism, surfing, sports fishing and boating over the entire Pacific Northwest coastline is – you guessed it – the old Bush juggernaut, national security.

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The Navy published its notice in five Washington newspapers, including the state-wide Seattle Times, but in only a single small-town weekly paper from Lincoln City, in north coastal Oregon, and a small California paper from Eureka.

In September 2007, the Navy held hearings on developing the scope and number of significant issues to be covered in the EIS, holding three meetings in Washington, one in Eureka, California, and one in the tiny town of Depoe Bay, Oregon. Unless Oregonians from other parts of its 262-mile coastline happened to read the weekly Lincoln City paper, they had no way of knowing about the meeting or the Navy’s proposal to take over Oregon’s territorial waters.
Fast forward to December 2008. As the Bush administration packed up to depart this vale of tears, the Navy rushed its 700-plus page draft environmental impact statement into print. The EIS, predictably, concluded that its missiles, bombs, guns, sonar and other explosive operations would have no significant impact on marine mammals, birds, or fish and no significant impact on humans along the Oregon coast.

The Navy announced publication of the EIS in the same newspapers as before, giving the public 45 days to submit comments on its proposal. The Navy thus presumed it served adequate notice to the entire population of Oregon, which has a vested interest in the state’s valuable coastal waters and coastline, by printing a notice in a tiny weekly paper in a single coastal town. In addition, the only hard copy of the EIS provided for the entire population of Oregon was lodged in the library of the same town.

During January 2009, the Navy placed ads in the weekly newspaper of Newport, Oregon, midway down the coast, announcing a meeting for public comments on the EIS in nearby South Beach on Jan. 30, 11 days before the public comment period ended. The ads were in very small type, buried in back pages, such as the sports section, of the Newport paper. Very few people noticed them. On the day before the meeting, news spread by word of mouth from people whose friends in Seattle had read of the meetings in the Seattle Times. Very few of those who were informed could travel all the way to Newport to attend the meeting.

Among these were a marine mammal expert, Bruce Mate; a county commissioner and commercial fisherman, Terry Thompson; at least one other fisherman; an 80-year-old activist on marine reserves and coastal conservation issues; at least one lawyer, and other local residents. Every person who commented complained about the absurdly inadequate notice given to the Oregon public about Navy usurpation of its coastal waters. The other comments criticized the Navy’s abysmal ignorance of the people, economy, geography, wildlife and politics of the area they proposed to control.

“I asked the Navy officials how their activities would affect the marine reserves off the coast, and they just looked blank and said they knew nothing about any marine reserves,” 80-year-old Charlotte Mills reported.

“And when I asked how a press release to the Lincoln City News Guard could possibly give adequate notice of their proposal, their PR person said she thought the News Guard was the same as the Newport News Times.

“They simply didn’t bother to do their homework,” said Susan Hogg, a Newport lawyer who attended the meeting. “I only heard about the meeting the day before and hadn’t had time to read the EIS, but it was obvious from other commenters that the Navy hadn’t bothered to talk to any local people or experts. Now that I’ve looked at it, the document is so vague and contradictory it doesn’t reveal their real intentions at all. What the Navy’s asking is a blank check to do whatever it wants over the whole Pacific Northwest coast.”

Oregon’s territorial waters, of course, are a resource of the entire nation, and the issue of a Navy take-over is of national as well as state concern. Ceding all peaceful uses and enjoyment of our coastal waters to military war preparations reflects a monumental change in our national identity, economy, society and philosophy. The US Navy should have notified not only the people of Oregon but of the whole nation of such a drastic shift in public policy.

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4 Responses to “Navy plan would turn Pacific Coast into firing range”

1. 

victoriaon 03 Feb 2009 at 2:27 am

kristenb, eric, your words of the northwest coastline echo in my heart. That the coastline should be so abused is worse than atrocity.

And yes, I have seen the clear cutting. Toured through some of those forestless stumped areas with three beautiful young girl children. To see them next to that. Well, what can I say?

To walk on the floor of sponge in the rainforest with no other sound but that of the rainforest . . . well, what can I say? I cannot transcribe the experience into words.

2. 

kristenbon 02 Feb 2009 at 12:03 pm

Oh, did I mention the forest devastation in both coastal and central cascades? Go to Scotland to see the effects of denuding the forest on adjacent sea life. How much harvesting can one chunk of land endure???

PS I’ll help Carol fight this!!! Go Carol.

[Kinda weird because my mom’s name is Carol ;)]

3. 

kristenbon 02 Feb 2009 at 11:56 am

The Navy has been quietly hijacking the northwest coast and waters for a couple of decades via sonar testing (killing sea life) to assessment of former forts from my knowledge. One of my college roommates became a navy comm officer in the mid-1980’s and on into the 1990’s before leaving the military due to sexual orientation court battles, etc.

Now, besides the mining law, the laws governing international waters versus domestic waters is old and outdated, but continues to evade meaningful, contemporary update. Why? Resources and sloppy interpretation of access to one’s own benefit, aka the military or government.

Some of the worst pollutants come from military testing and exercises. I worked as an environmental field geologist during the NAVY CLEAN campaign era and there is water flowing in common neighborhoods in Puget Sound that will never be fit to drink again. Buried drums full of PCB’s, dioxins and explosive ooze no one remembers until we RCRA, CERCLA folk go and poke around to our own detriment, and the list goes on.

I grew up in Oregon, Eugene/Springfield, and the ENTIRE Oregon coast should be preserved as a world heritage zone, it is that beautiful and rich and magical!!!

The other AMAZING thing about Oregon, and the coastline, is that the state population agreed, imagine !, that public access to the ocean was a priority, a human right and so you can not drive more than a few miles without encountering access via a city, county or state park. This is very different from Washington and California. But, Oregon has always battled dichotomy directly - from introducing the bottle bill to the nation (aka recycling in the early 1970’s) to fighting the takeover of Antelope, Oregon by Osho’s group renaming Rajneeshpuram, creating bike lanes on major city streets to dealing with corrupt and poor road builders.

My first memory is from 1.5 yrs of age. My parents had moved us out from Kansas so my father could attend graduate school at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon. [My parents had never seen an ocean so they chose Oregon over Ohio - thank the goddess!] University of Oregon is 40 miles south in Eugene, Oregon. A summer day in the Willamette Valley at 80 degrees, we were dressed in tiny shorts and tank tops. We jumped or were put into the car, drove the 45 minute windy, hill and river laden drive to the coast, tumbling out onto the beach in Newport at Seal Rock State Park to discover dense fog and 50 degree temperatures.

I remember because it was so COLD and hauntingly beautiful. I went on to spend many happy
childhood days collecting rocks, poking my fingers in anemones, oogling baby octopi, catching sight of seals, whales and drawing in the sand. And, peering out from deck of many of the old lighthouses wondering what was beyond the western horizon.

No access would be a crime, pure and simple. And, polluting the waters and disturbing the wildlife a heinous crime.

4. *mysteson* 02 Feb 2009 at 11:20 am

Yeah, the buddhababe turned up in a dream in 2002 and showed me that the most noxious of our military expenditures were on ships anchored off of the west coast (though at the time it was nearer San Diego). Her msg was to keep an eye on those Bad Boys, and goose 'em from time to time.

It was a great dream. We were in a restaurant and I ordered seafood. The food came, and She swept it to the floor in a single move, threw me up onto the table and began playing me like a banjo. As soon as I became orgasmic, we shifted to a battleship anchored near SD and I found myself talking with the captain, who was one very focused, very cocksure asshole. The buddhababe raised the energy again and we torqued the sonar equipment. Just like that.

A few days later I read something about NRDC taking on that very issue, broadside. I sent them a donation. And a big ol' wet kiss.

The lesson: Lead with the bright edge of your inner vision. The world will follow.