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Is Navy plan a threat to world's oldest killer whales?

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WASHINGTON — Could Ruffles and Granny be in trouble?

At 59, Ruffles is the oldest known male orca in the world, one of an estimated 150 orcas known to inhabit the Puget Sound and the coast of Washington state. Granny is his 99-year-old mother.

Environmentalists fear for the safety of the whales as the U.S. Navy prepares to expand its operations in its Northwest Training Range Complex, which stretches from the coastline of Washington state to northern California.

"They're all very susceptible," said Howard Garrett, the president of Orca Network, a nonprofit group based in Washington state. "The Navy is single-minded and they're focused, and the whales are very much a secondary concern to them."

The group is among the many opponents in Washington state and California lining up against the Navy's plan.

The proposal, which has already been approved by the Obama administration, calls for increased sailor training and weapons testing on the site. It also includes the development of an underwater training minefield for submarines.

The site, which has been in use since before World War II, consists of 122,400 nautical square miles of space, equal roughly to the size of California.

Navy officials are trying to allay concerns over their activities, telling the public that the marine life will be safe.

"We are not even permitted to kill even one marine mammal. ... What people don't seem to understand is we share the environment with everybody," said Sheila Murray, a Navy spokeswoman. "It's our environment, too. Of course we want to take care of it. The Navy goes to great lengths to protect the marine environment."

Of the Navy's expanded operations at the site, she said: "This training is important. It allows Naval forces to be prepared."

Opponents fear that missile and sonar testing and the dumping of depleted uranium could hurt the whales.

In a letter to the Navy, the Natural Resources Defense Council said the plan "would pose significant risk to whales, fish and other wildlife." And the council said the plan would release a variety of hazardous materials into coastal waters, including "thousands of rounds of spent ammunition and unexploded ordnance containing chromium, chromium compounds, depleted uranium" and more.

The NRDC also said the mid-frequency sonar the Navy uses to detect submarines and underwater objects interferes with whales' ability to navigate and communicate, and that the chronic noise can disrupt whales' brain development and depress reproductive rates.

"I'm not convinced by the assurances that the Navy gives that there will be no effect," Garrett said. "I can't imagine that there won't be mortalities."

Murray called that concern a myth.

"There's a lot of myths out there," she said. "The Navy's been training on that range since before World War II: 70 years. Nobody was even aware that the Navy was there. And if what they were saying was true, they would see dead marine mammals floating up on shore. It's not true."

Even though the Navy has approved the plan, Murray said the expanded training hasn't yet begun. But she said the Navy now has the permission and flexibility to increase training activities whenever it needs to do so.

"As of right now, nothing has changed," she said.

The Supreme Court ruled two years ago that the Navy could use sonar in training exercises off the Southern California coast without heeding restrictions imposed by a lower court to protect whales and dolphins. The Navy voluntarily adopted some protective measures.

Not everyone is satisfied.

Garrett, who has photographed both Ruffles and Granny, said he's not only concerned about the orcas, but all of the whales in the training area.

"There's going to be a lot of toxic material that's going to sink," said Garrett, who lives in Greenbank, Wash. "And to what extent is that going to get into the food chain and into the diets of the whales?"

Garrett said the dispute is "an inherent values conflict" between conducting war exercises and protecting marine life.

"I would prefer that they hold off and realize that they've got to look harder and deeper for solutions to this than to just simply escalate their war technology," he said.

He said the Orca Network will try to monitor how the whales fare, difficult as it might be.

"We don't have any inside track, and Navy operations are not broadcast," he said. "So we'll just have to hope there is some report if anything happens. We don't have the eyes and ears out there. We're dependent on news sources to ask questions and publish the answers."

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