



SWITCHBOARD

Natural Resources Defense Council Staff Blog

Zak Smith's Blog

NRDC Seeks to Protect Whales in the Pacific Northwest from Sonar



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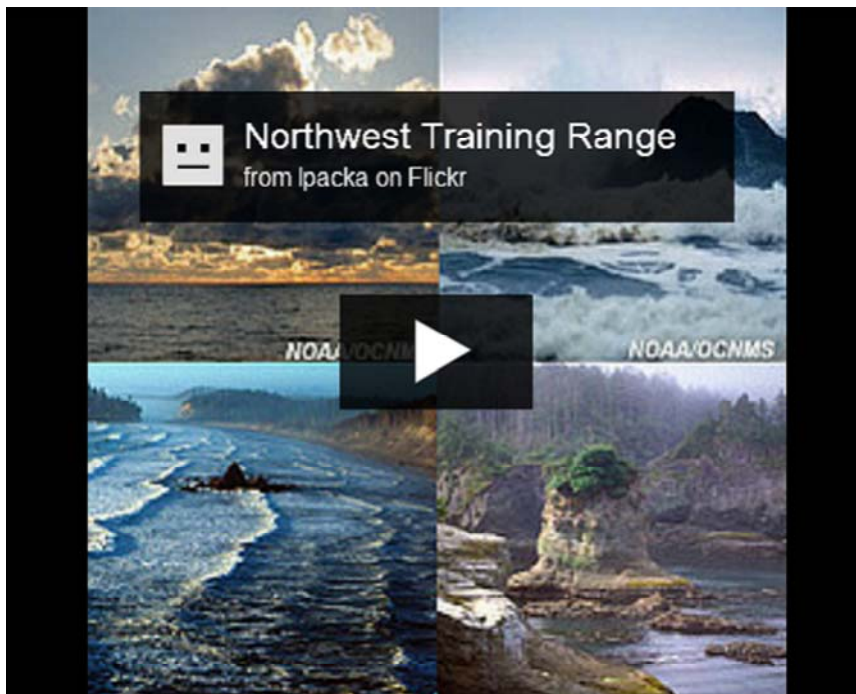
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Today, NRDC is suing the government agency charged with protecting marine mammals from the Navy's harmful use of sonar. That agency, the National Marine Fisheries Service ("NMFS") has a statutory responsibility to manage, conserve, and protect living marine resources, like whales and dolphins, particularly those protected by the Endangered Species Act. Unfortunately, when it came to protecting whales and other marine life from the harmful impacts of the Navy's use of sonar in the coastal waters of the Pacific Northwest, NMFS simply didn't do its job, authorizing more than 700,000 marine mammal "takes" from Navy activities in the area over five years without any meaningful mitigation.

It seems as if every time NMFS had a chance to do more for whales, it merely rubber-stamped the Navy's analysis. How else are we to understand NMFS's failure to set aside one square inch of a Navy range the size of the State of California from sonar's dangerous impacts? How else are we to understand NMFS's failure to set any mitigation for harbor porpoises – an extremely sensitive species that stands to bear 90% of the harm according to NMFS's own analysis. Instead of seeing this disproportionate impact as a sign that more must be done to protect harbor porpoises, NMFS used the species' sensitivity as a reason to dismiss the high number of impacts.

Make no mistake, mid-frequency active sonar can kill, injure, and disturb marine mammals. The Navy and NMFS accept this fact. It has definitively caused or been associated with multiple mass stranding events of whales and other marine mammals around the world.

Let's go through the following slide show to understand a bit more about what's at stake:



The first picture is a composite of four photos of the Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary, a region of extraordinary biological diversity that is completely encompassed within the Navy's Northwest Training Range Complex ("NWTRC"). Twenty-nine species of marine mammals occur in the Olympic Coast NMFS, including eight threatened or endangered species of whales, pinnipeds, and otters.

The sanctuary provides important regular foraging habitat for humpback and killer whales, including the critically endangered Southern Resident killer whale, whose dramatic sensitivity to mid-frequency sonar was documented during a 2003 incident in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Gray whales use the sanctuary during biannual migrations between calving and feeding areas, and a small, possibly distinct, group of gray whales known as “summer residents” use the area for feeding every summer. Oregon/Washington harbor porpoises have primary habitat within the coastal waters encompassed by the Sanctuary.

The second slide is a detailed shot of Southern California and shows the size of the Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary in relation to the area’s National Parks. We don’t allow our military to have unfettered access to our National Parks for training purposes, for what I hope are obvious reasons. Yet NMFS refused to put any restrictions on the Navy’s use of sonar in the Sanctuary.

The third slide shows the size of the NWTRC Offshore Area – 122,400 nm² – in comparison to the rest of the United States. It covers an area equivalent to the entire state of California! Do you think there may be small portions of this California-sized range where sonar shouldn’t be used because they are so biologically important? NMFS apparently doesn’t think so, despite repeatedly acknowledging that keeping sonar out of important marine-mammal habitat is the most effective means of protecting marine mammals from sonar impacts.

The remaining slides are images of some of the marine mammal species that will be harmed by the Navy’s use of sonar: minke whales, humpback whales, harbor porpoises, striped dolphins, pygmy sperm whales, California sea lions, gray whales, Dall’s porpoises, and Southern Resident killer whales.

Our suit, which we bring with other concerned organizations (InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council, Center for Biological Diversity, Friends of the Earth, Friends of the San Juans, and People for Puget Sound), asks the Court to send the approvals of the Navy’s activities back to NMFS for further work, with instructions to get it right – do your duty under the law, do more to protect marine mammals.

I look forward to keeping you updated on our challenge in the months ahead.

Click this link if you'd like to read a copy of our press release, [Navy Training Blasts Marine Mammals with Harmful Sonar](#).

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