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EDITORIAL

Marine Mammals and the Navy's 5-Year Plan

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Between 2014 and 2019, the United States Navy hopes to conduct testing and training exercises in the Atlantic and the Pacific that will involve sonars and explosives of many different kinds.

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Over the years, the Navy has been forced to acknowledge what science has clearly demonstrated: noise generated by sonar and underwater detonations can kill marine mammals, like whales and porpoises, and disturb their normal feeding, breeding and migration. In preparing for its

upcoming exercises, the Navy has asked the National Marine
Fisheries Service for approval to "take" a number of marine mammals — "take" being the
broad term for everything from killing these creatures to disturbing their habits.

This all sounds as it should be, with the Navy requesting permission from the agency, as required by various laws protecting marine mammals and endangered species. But the numbers say something else. In its testing areas in the Atlantic, the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific, the Navy estimates that between 2014 and 2019 it will "take" nearly 33 million marine mammals — everything from blue whales to elephant seals.

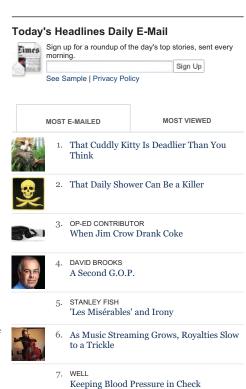
Most of these creatures will be disturbed in some way but not injured or killed. But the damage could still be considerable. Sound travels much faster through water than it does through air, magnifying its impact, and many of the sounds the Navy plans to generate fall in the frequencies most damaging to marine mammals. More than five million of them may suffer ruptured eardrums and temporary hearing loss, in turn disrupting normal behavioral patterns. As many as 1,800 may be killed outright, either by testing or by ship strikes.

The Navy is proceeding on the basis of a 2008 Supreme Court decision, in which Chief Justice John Roberts Jr., writing for the majority, argued that the public interest in our military defense tipped the scales "strongly in favor of the Navy." We disagree, and so do the environmental organizations that have sued the Navy in the past. Perhaps most alarming is the Navy's conclusion — after an exhaustive list of potential injuries and the uncertainties involved in estimating them — that "impacts on marine mammal species and stocks would be negligible." This is wishful thinking, at best.

The Navy says the exercises are necessary to test its readiness and weapons systems, and it promises to make every effort to lessen the adverse consequences for marine mammals. But the sonic chaos the Navy plans to inflict on the oceans must be added to the long list of other threats facing these mammals, some of which, like the North Atlantic right whale, are on the endangered species list.

It is up to the National Marine Fisheries Service to send the Navy back to the drawing board. The damage it intends to do is simply unacceptable.





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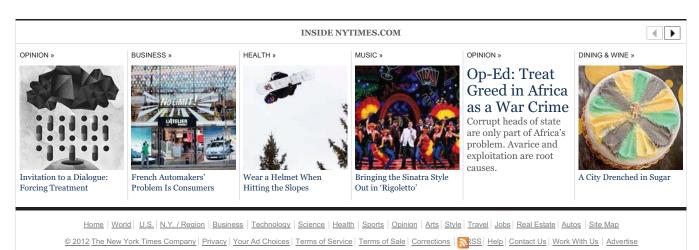
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