



# Ocean Mammal Institute

## U.S. Navy's proposed Undersea Warfare Training Range (USWTR)

### **What it is:**

The stated purpose of this undersea warfare training range is to train US Navy personnel in the use of active sonar to find, track and pursue submarines in a shallow water environment at a suitable location for Atlantic Fleet units. The range:

- Will cover an area of 500 square nautical miles with submarines, surface ships and aircraft all using the range.
- Exercise scenarios would run approx. 470 times each year, from two to six hours at a time and involve non-explosive torpedoes and target simulators that result in significant undersea noise.
- According to Kate Wiltrout of the Virginian Pilot Newspaper, the Navy estimates that the range would cost an estimated \$100 million.
- Of the four potential sites identified by the Navy the North Carolina site – Cherry Point – was initially preferred. After significant protest by people in North Carolina, the Navy switched its choice to the Jacksonville, Florida site.

### **The Problem:**

Unfortunately, the Jacksonville site is just 30 miles away from the North Atlantic right whales only calving habitat off the Georgia Bight.

The North Atlantic right whale is considered to be one of, if not the most endangered of the great whales in the world. People estimate that there are only about 250-300 individuals left in the population. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has stated that the loss of even one of these individuals could result in the extinction of the species. Since the Georgia coast is the only known calving area for the species, the use of Jacksonville, Florida as the preferred site for the USWTR range could spell extinction for the species. "The bottom line is that we are dealing with an extremely endangered species, not only in the marine mammal world, but in the world in general" says Brad Winn, Coastal Nongame Program Manager with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Winter is an especially critical time for this population, since the survival of the species is dependent on successful birthing and rearing of calves. The peak calving season is December through March. The most responsible thing to do would be to move the site away from this critical habitat. The next most responsible thing would be to not do exercises during the calving season. The navy has refused to consider these options.

A growing body of scientific research confirms that undersea human generated noise, and especially the type of military active sonar that will be used at this site, is dangerous to marine life. This technology can induce a range of adverse effects in marine mammals and other ocean life, ranging from behavioral disturbance to injury and death. At lower intensities, intense noise can interfere with the ability of marine animals to navigate, avoid predators, find food, care for their young, and ultimately, to survive. At higher intensities internal organs can be physiologically impacted and stranded animals have been found with internal hemorrhages and gas bubbles in various organs after sonar exercises.

According to the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission the evidence linking military sonar to whale strandings is "*very convincing, and appears overwhelming.*" The following is a partial list of whale strandings and deaths that have been associated with the use of military active sonar:

- Haro Strait off the coast of Washington State (2003); the Canary Islands (2004, 2002); Madeira (2000); the U.S. Virgin Islands (1999, 1998); and in Greece (1996).
- One of the best documented incidents occurred in the Bahamas in 2000 when 16 whales of three species stranded along 150 miles of shoreline as ships transited the area using sonar. The U.S. Navy has acknowledged in an official report that its use of sonar resulted in acoustic trauma in the stranded whales.

- December 2004, 169 whales and dolphins died on the beaches in Australia and New Zealand after reported military exercises and air gun use in the area.
- January 2005, 37 whales of three species stranded along North Carolina's Outer Banks after U.S. Navy sonar exercises.
- March 2005, almost 80 dolphins stranded on the U.S. Coast of Florida after acknowledged use of naval sonar.

Intense ocean noise also can injure and kill fish. Several studies show that commercial catch rates of fish decrease 40-80% when loud sound is in the area. Additionally, the noise has been shown to impact snow crabs and giant squid. *What will happen to commercial and recreational fishing in the Jacksonville area?*

Anglers and angling organizations also are very concerned about the amount of wreckage that will remain on the sea floor after the exercises. In their Draft Environmental Impact Statement, the Navy acknowledges that USWTR operations will result in the deployment and abandonment of thousands of sonobuoys, acoustic device countermeasures, training targets, control wires, and air launch accessories.

International institutions have already recognized the threat that ocean noise presents to marine life. The United Nations General Assembly recently acknowledged the threat in its Oceans Resolution and called on member states, including the U.S., to consider the impacts of ocean noise. Other bodies calling for precaution in the use of human generated underwater noise include: the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission; the European Parliament; and the World Conservation Union.

### **Our Concerns about the Navy's Draft EIS:**

- The navy does not plan to halt training during the two-three critical months during the peak North Atlantic right whale calving season.
- Ship strikes are already a significant cause of death for the right whale. The National Marine Fisheries Service has requested that the Navy and other federal agencies' ships adhere to a 10 knot speed limit in right whale presence. The Navy's Draft EIS did not adopt this limit.
- The use of passive acoustic monitoring to locate nearby whales before beginning a sonar exercise is not considered.
- Cumulative effects due to repeated exposure to intense noise on marine life during the 470 exercises each year are not considered.

### **Now What:**

The public comment period is now closed and the Navy has the responsibility to analyze all submitted statements and write a Final Environmental Impact Statement. This final EIS is projected to be released in summer 2009. Construction of the USWTR could begin as early as 2013.

### **Conclusion:**

We must develop a balanced plan that meets both the needs of one of the most endangered species in the world and the need to protect ourselves from enemy submarines in our coastal environment. The Georgia and north Florida coastal waters are the most important and sensitive habitat for the remaining North Atlantic right whales. These waters support all calving activity for this critically endangered species. ***"If we intend, as a society and nation to fulfill our obligations to this magnificent animal, then we need to be 100 percent sure that any activity we engage in will not negatively impact the integrity of this calving area"*** says Brad Winn of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. We agree with Brad and are concerned that the Navy's plans as outlined in their current Draft Environmental Impact Statement do not adequately address our obligation to the highly endangered North Atlantic right whale. We owe it to ourselves and future generations to choose the responsible course of action and protect this endangered species and other marine life. How does this happen? It is time for citizens to weigh in. Write to your State and Federal representatives and ask them to protect the right whales' critical calving habitat. State and Federal Legislators in North Carolina made their opposition to the Cherry Point location known.

*"Never doubt that a small group of concerned citizens can change the world.  
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." -Margaret Mead*