

# A Public Choice Analysis of the U.S. Military and the Environment

Marter, Alexandra (ECO)

Environmental interests and United States military interests often conflict with one another. For example, Navy sonar technology has been well documented to interfere with the behavior of acoustic-sensitive marine mammals, causing them to beach themselves and die<sup>1</sup>. Although there have been over 22 separate cases and at least 380 recorded deaths of whales and dolphins over the past few decades<sup>1</sup>, the impact of US Navy sonar training activities is one small example of a pattern of negative environmental externalities brought by the US military throughout history. Using Public Choice Economics as an analytical framework, we argue that the negative environmental consequences generated as a result of military activity are unlikely to stop under current democratic constraints.

A basic model of government, assumes that policymakers will create regulation in the public interest, meaning that regulation should maximize social welfare or protect the public from market failures such as environmental externalities<sup>2</sup>. However, Public Choice literature shows that in the exchanges among policymakers, voters, and bureaucracy, policy often serves the interest of individual political actors rather than the broader public interest<sup>2</sup>. It is also often assumed that defense is a pure public good provided in optimal quality and quantity; however Defense and Peace Economics literature contradicts this<sup>3</sup>.

In our case study of navy sonar and marine mammals, injury to marine mammals represent environmental externalities that the US government fails to correct. There are three common public choice issues underlying this case: the limited power of voters, bureaucratic growth and self-interest, and the push of special interest groups. Although surveys show that voters believe the US Navy should not be exempt from environmental regulations in times of peace<sup>4</sup>, voter power is limited by infrequent election cycles and military secrecy<sup>3</sup>.

This has pushed the debate to the arena of the judiciary, where environmental groups such as the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) have vouched for marine mammals via frequent litigation over the past two decades<sup>5</sup>. As a bureaucracy focused on its mission of national security, the Department of Defense (DOD) actually makes the externalities more severe by pushing for more exemptions to environmental regulation. The DOD claims that regulations impact readiness and training but have failed to provide supporting evidence<sup>6</sup>. Despite these doubts, the courts have almost always favored the US Navy's interests in these Cases<sup>5</sup>, as defense is assumed to be a pure public good and the burden of proof is on the environmental groups.

Lastly, defense contractors are often found to function as special interest groups that engage in lobbying activities to further their business interests and profit<sup>3</sup>. For example, leading military sonar contractor Raytheon has lobbied over \$4 million for defense budget issues since 1998 and has donated campaign contributions to politicians that have earmarked funds for Navy sonar development<sup>7</sup>. Overall, these public choice issues indicate that negative environmental externalities generated by the US military will continue.

## Works Cited

1. Jasny, M. 2005. Sounding the Depths II: The Rising Toll of Sonar, Shipping and Industrial Ocean Noise on Marine Life (Report). Natural Resources Defense Council. Available online: <https://www.nrdc.org/resources/sounding-depths-ii-rising-toll-sonar-shipping-and-industrial-ocean-noise-marine-life>
2. Hall, A.R. 2015. Drones: Public interest, public choice, and the expansion of unmanned aerial vehicles. *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*, 21(2): 1-40.
3. Coyne, C.J. 2014. Lobotomizing the defense brain. *The Review of Austrian Economics*, 28: 371–396.
4. Zirbel, K., Balint, P., & Parsons, E.C.M. 2011. Public awareness and attitudes towards naval sonar mitigation for cetacean conservation: A preliminary case study in Fairfax County, Virginia (the DC Metro area). *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, 63: 49-55.
5. Zirbel, K., Balint, P., & Parsons, E.C.M. 2011. Navy sonar, cetaceans and the US Supreme Court: A review of cetacean mitigation and litigation in the US. *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, 63: 40-48.
6. United States Congressional Research Service. Exemptions from Environmental Law for the Department of Defense: Background and Issues for Congress (RS22149; May 15, 2007), by David M. Bearden. Available online: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a472908.pdf>
7. Center for Responsive Politics. N.d.(a). “Raytheon Co.” Available online: <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/summary?id=D00000017>