

Opinion: Convert Washington's only UNESCO World Heritage Site to a warfare training zone?

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By Barbara Solomon

Rep. Derek Kilmer, holding Town Hall meetings to address public concerns about the Navy's plans, didn't mention that they involve Olympic National Park, the state's only UNESCO World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve.

Phuong Le's story ("Navy wants to deploy more sonar-emitting buoys," Associated Press, Jan. 25) ignored the fact that much of the area the Navy wants for warfare training includes a National Marine Sanctuary. It quotes John Mosher, Northwest environmental manager for the U.S. Pacific Fleet, saying, "There's no safety issue for the public, wildlife or the environment," flying in the face of substantive scientific evidence to the contrary.

UNESCO standards identify Olympic National Park, as with its other sites, as an "irreplaceable source of life and inspiration" and consider it "to be of outstanding value to humanity." Its role to protect and preserve such "natural heritage" is embodied in an international treaty. The concept of World Heritage Sites is that they "belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located."

To provide some context, in South England, the Jurassic Coast, that country's only World Heritage Site, is being threatened by a large energy corporation that is attempting to construct the world's largest wind farm on that site. UNESCO has stepped in to pressure their government to halt these plans, saying the World Heritage Site status will be removed. The issue on the English Coast is preserving the view.

In western Washington, threats include view-obstructing towers emitting electromagnetic radiation in the midst of pristine nature; horrific noise pollution; and staggeringly complex potential problems for every aspect of delicate ecosystems on land, in the sea and in the air. The Navy also wants to fly "Growler" fighter jets, probably the loudest on earth, along migratory bird flyways.

What possible rationale exists even to consider, let alone support, allowing the Navy to override the legacy of all the peoples of the world?

Consider the well-known case of the spotted owl, one of several endangered species that make their homes in Olympic National Park. In 1990, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declared the northern spotted owl a threatened species. Therefore, these owls are protected under the Endangered Species Act signed into law in 1973.

These endangered owls are an indicator species that survive in their last stronghold in the Hoh Rain Forest BECAUSE IT'S QUIET. They are extremely sensitive to any noise, let alone the roars and sonic

booms from squadrons of fighter jets. The protected owls surely would be driven to extinction, experiencing, per scientific prediction, an agonizing death in the process.

More and more is being learned and revealed about the possible effects of exposure to electromagnetic radiation — and we do know that the devices used for war are not created with health in mind.

Overflying jets can activate sonobouys, deploy depth charges and make other assaults on all the creatures of the Olympic Coast Marine Sanctuary. Sonar ensures the demise of hosts of undersea creatures, including the endangered leatherback turtles, our state's iconic (and endangered) orcas, and other threatened species that depend on delicate, complex hearing systems to hunt, communicate and navigate.

The brain-exploding sounds from sonar, mines and underwater explosions can travel for hundreds of miles without losing their destructive strength.

In an unprecedented action, the National Park Service has declared the military's intent to be contrary to its mission and harmful to the environment and the economy of the region. All government agencies must follow the Endangered Species Act, right up to the President, who is also the Commander in Chief of the Navy.

There is no way of significantly "mitigating" the damage this will cause, despite Rep. Kilmer's attempts to convince his audiences that such measures would make everything fine. Requiring a minimum flight elevation of 10,000 feet — whether above ground level or above sea level — would not preserve the "soundscape" or the "viewscape" of Olympic National Park.

The military has other bases and areas for their operations that have been used successfully for their training exercises; expanding their operations in western Washington jeopardizes tourism and undermines property values that cripple faltering, not-yet recovered local economies.

Count us among the many Olympic Peninsula residents who believe that there is a moral imperative to stop this frightening plan, act as responsible stewards and protect this area's irreplaceable legacy for the Earth and all her people.

Barbara Solomon is a Sequim resident. Reach her at coachedbyanangel@earthlink.net.

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