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Editor
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To the Editor and SF Chronicle readers,

Regarding the “Baffling Deaths of Another Gray Whale” and the Oceanic Society seeking answers to the dramatic rise in wandering and beached whales (*San Francisco Chronicle* April 25, 2000.) Perhaps one factor to consider is in the U.S. Department of Fisheries recent approval of an Environmental Impact Statement (E.I.S.) that allows the U.S. Navy to begin an underwater communication program called the Surveillance Towed Array Sonar System (SURTASS.) This technology generates extremely loud sounds in the ocean with 100,000 to 1 million times more sound energy than the loudest whales.

While the E.I.S. was questioned by scientists, was not inclusive of any potentially compromising evidence, and is grounded in speculative assumptions, it was non-the-less approved by the Dept. of Fisheries. Since their approval, the Navy has be able to pollute the global oceanic soundscape indiscriminately. Coincident to the widespread use of SURTASS is a rise in unusual beachings of beaked whales in the Bahamas – suffering traumatic tissue damage (*SF Chronicle* Mar. 22, 2000,) unusual beachings in Australia, and the increased incidents of otherwise healthy adult and juvenile whales beaching themselves or entering San Francisco bay.

The reason SURTASS has largely gone unnoticed by the public is because we tend to think of the ocean as a silent place, so adding noise to the ocean is not an obvious concern. But in a submarine environment where visibility is 100 feet at best, sound plays a crucial role in ocean creatures abilities to communicate and navigate. The scale of noise added to their environment by SURTASS would be equivalent to our having to communicate and live on the runway of SFO on a continuous daily basis. It is not surprising to me that some whales are seeking the “quieter waters” of the bay as refuge from the noise – or maybe they are just disoriented by it.

I have written about this more thoroughly in the upcoming edition *Whole Earth* magazine and would like to encourage the Oceanic Society and the public to explore the issue in more detail – hopefully to put the brakes on this very pernicious use of military power against our oceans.

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