

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

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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 die¹. Although there have been over 22 separate cases and at least 380 recorded deaths of whales and dolphins over the past few decades¹, 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 externalities². 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 interest². 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 this³.

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 peace⁴, voter power is limited by infrequent election cycles and military secrecy³.

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 decades⁵. 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 evidence⁶. Despite these doubts, the courts have almost always favored the US Navy's interests in these Cases⁵, 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 profit³. 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 development⁷. Overall, these public choice issues indicate that negative environmental externalities generated by the US military will continue.

Works Cited

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