

# Seattle Times

## Serene Olympic National Park is no place for noisy Navy Growlers

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EA-18G Growlers, with some San Juan Islands in the background, prepare for an exercise at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, March 10, 2016. (Ken Lambert / The Seattle Times)

By

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*Special to The Times*

Washington state is blessed with national parks in which you can escape into nature. The importance of having these spectacular places on our

doorstep has only grown during this pandemic, in which travel restrictions and lockdowns have left more Washingtonians heading into our national parks to sample the tranquillity that has been in short supply this year. But unfortunately, many visitors at Olympic National Park are increasingly reporting a very different experience.

The park, which is home to what has been called the [quietest place](#) in the United States, is being regularly buzzed by fighter jets on training flights from the nearby Whidbey Island Naval Air Station. The very first studies of the noise impact on the park, [reported](#) by The Seattle Times, have found the sound of fighter jets flying overhead can be as loud as a garbage disposal to people within the park, and that the noise can be harmful to ocean life, including endangered orca that visit the peninsula's waters.

It is beyond time that the Navy held these noisy training flights elsewhere. Jet noise can have a serious impact on the park, its visitors and its wildlife. Previous studies show that persistent loud noise at these levels affects people's mental health and cognition, and is even associated with cardiovascular health effects such as strokes and the risk of heart disease. Its impact on wildlife can heighten stress, lead to changes in behavior and even result in fewer offspring being born.

Ironically for the Navy, it did not think to look underwater when assessing the impact of its jet noise on the environment. However, scientists now know the sound of fighter jets can be heard 100 feet underwater around runways on Whidbey Island and at sound levels that are known to disturb the region's endangered orca population.

This data is a long time coming. For years, we have tried to learn details about these flights and their impacts from the Navy but have been met with silence. We have submitted freedom of information requests that have been ignored and have even taken the matter to court to unearth the extent of these training flights and their impact.

But while the Navy has dragged its feet, these studies finally confirm what residents and park visitors have been saying for years: that the screeching of Growler jets overhead is audible throughout the park; it is at decibel levels that are harmful to people and wildlife; and takes place all through the day, leaving parks visitors and wildlife in one of the nation's most peaceful parks no refuge from the noise of military fighter planes.

This is true even for the Hoh Rain Forest, a unique area on the west side of the Olympic Mountains, which was named the least noise-polluted place in the Lower 48 states by acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton on his search for the quietest place in the nation. This world-famous place of quiet solitude now averages 57 minutes of jet fighter noise every day.

The current situation is bad, but it's likely to get far worse. The Navy plans a major increase in the number of Growler jets — one of the loudest in the military — that will be stationed at their Whidbey Island air base, and flights will become even more frequent.

It doesn't get captured in the spectacular photographs of Mount Olympus or the pristine Lake Crescent, but the sound of leaves rustling, rivers running and trees creaking from the

Pacific wind is still a crucial part of any park visit. The widespread opposition to these overhead flights has even grown to include military veterans who value the park's tranquility as part of their treatment for post-traumatic stress disorders. For them, the sight and sound of fighter jets invading this space are especially unwelcome.

We don't doubt the need for training flights and value the Navy's presence in the region. However, the Navy has other options and areas in which they can carry out these practice flights, but there is only one Olympic National Park, and the natural soundscapes of national parks are every bit as important as a park's trees, rivers and wildlife, and deserve the same protection.

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