

# Whale of a Problem

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One of my favorite flicks is 'Star Trek IV – The Voyage Home.' In the movie, a deep space probe threatens the Federation of Planets and Starfleet cannot stop it. The crew of the Enterprise discovers the probe speaks in the language of humpback whales, which are now extinct.

So Captain Kirk slingshots the Enterprise around the sun so fast they travel back in time to the 1980s to bring a pair of humpback whales back to the 24th century to communicate with the probe. At the end of the hilarious fish-out-of-water story, the spacemen of the future are successful with their mission.

Sometimes life imitates art, and what better art is there to imitate than 'Star Trek'? Last week the U.S. Supreme Court reviewed San Francisco's 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals' ruling that limited the Navy's use of sonar in training exercises off the southern coast of California. The court limited the use of sonar because of its potential harm to dolphins and whales.

The Navy uses sonar primarily to locate enemy submarines at sea, but it can inadvertently interfere with marine mammals' ability to navigate and communicate. Some marine biologists believe sonar has caused whales to become stranded on shore.

The Bush Administration requested the review because the ruling hampers the Navy's ability to train sailors and Marines for service during wartime. The government claims that matters of national security have priority over the rights of marine mammals, and that there is no documented evidence that the use of sonar in training exercises has caused harm to dolphins or whales.

The original lawsuit against the Navy was filed by the Natural Resources Defense Council and four other advocacy groups seeking to use sonar while still protecting wildlife. The watchdog groups cite the Navy's own environmental assessment that reflected the use of sonar could disturb or harm an estimated 170,000 marine mammals, including temporary loss of hearing in at least 8,000 whales.

Many claim this case will force the Supreme Court to boldly go where no court has gone before – deciding which is more important: national security or environmental protection.