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Navy Monitors Health of Marine Mammals

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. (March 11, 2014) Navy Facilities Engineering Command, Atlantic (NAVFAC) hosted environmental specialists from academia, industry, the Navy, and the National Marine Fisheries Service during the two-day 2014 Atlantic Marine Species Monitoring Program Annual Review Meeting in Virginia Beach, Va. March 2014.

The primary goals of the meeting were to review initial findings of marine mammal, sea turtle, and fish monitoring work accomplished in 2013 and facilitate collaboration for future projects. The monitoring work, which the Navy began in 2009, will help inform environmental analyses, with the overall objective of reducing potential impacts of Navy at-sea training on marine species. According to Joel Bell, NAVFAC marine mammal program manager, the monitoring work also helps the Navy maintain its readiness.

“The Navy is subject to the same environmental laws as everyone else. So anytime the Navy wants to conduct training at sea that involves using sonar or underwater explosives, we are required to get a permit,” said Bell. “One of the stipulations that allow us to train at sea is that we conduct surveys of the areas where we’re operating. So if we’re operating in an area that’s known to have any endangered species, we have to monitor the impact we have on those species and attempt to minimize any disruption.”

Bell said in order to better understand how to effectively mitigate impacts from at-sea training, the Navy works in cooperation with other governmental and non-governmental organizations with expertise in marine life.

Professor Dr. Andrew Read, Division of Marine Science and Conservation at Duke University, said the partnership between academia and the Navy has paid huge dividends in improving marine biology science.

“Our partnership with the Navy allows us to do things we’ve never been able to do before. Most marine biology research is done in easily accessible coastal regions. This project is giving us access to parts of the ocean floor that aren’t traditionally available to researchers,” said Read. “A good example is the three sites we have off the Eastern Seaboard. We have bottom-mounted acoustical monitoring stations on the seafloor about 50 miles off the coast. This allows us to listen to whale activity year-round and in an intensity and level of detail we couldn’t do without the support of the Navy.”

In addition to the monitoring sites in the Atlantic, the Pacific Fleet is also conducting similar monitoring around their at-sea training sites.

The Navy has committed more than \$250 million over the past decade to universities, research institutions, federal laboratories, private companies, and independent researchers around the world to increase the understanding of marine mammal physiology and behavior.

“One of the major benefits to this program is the amount of research data we’re able to make available to the marine biology community as a whole,” said Bell. “Academics at universities that aren’t officially part of the program can still access much of the data for their own research. So I think this program is really having a positive impact on the science of marine biology.”