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NOAA Scientists to Discuss New Technologies at Ocean Noise Forum

New technologies that are helping NOAA scientists, resource managers, and policymakers understand and manage human-produced and natural sounds in the global marine environment will be discussed at an ocean noise forum May 21-22 during the 2nd Annual International Marine Conservation Congress at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va.

“Helping everyone understand the importance of sound, both for marine life and humans, is critical in assessing the compatibility of multiple uses of the ocean environment,” said Sofie van Parijs, a marine bioacoustician at NOAA’s Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) laboratory in Woods Hole, Mass. who is co-chairing the forum.

Although specific ocean noise issues like the impact of sonar on whales has been highly publicized, van Parijs and colleagues from Cornell University and Marine Acoustics, Inc., say those who use the ocean for various purposes do not fully understand the broader impacts of underwater noise from various activities including offshore energy exploration and development, commercial shipping and transportation, and military sonar.

Panelists will present specific examples of how passive acoustic capabilities, when integrated into ocean observation systems, can be used to track animal movements and acoustic interactions. For example, acoustic integrated models can reveal ship and marine animal movements and acoustic interactions. The acoustic technologies also can help management and conservations efforts, often in real-time.

“The scientific benefits are significant, and these technologies provide opportunities to inform and engage the public in important science and conservation issues,” said Leila Hatch, a marine ecologist at Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary, which is located in a heavy vessel traffic area near Boston that is frequented by marine mammals like endangered North Atlantic right whales.

The Arctic Ocean has been identified as a priority area for use of the new technologies. Decreased Arctic ice cover has led to a potential boom in seismic explorations, and the region is expected to be open to trans-oceanic commercial vessel traffic by 2020. Video and other animations of ocean noise will demonstrate the impacts of these changes on the Arctic acoustic environment and the marine ecosystem.

Forum panelists will present other examples of how acoustic technologies can be used in marine areas around the world. Acoustic integrated models can reveal ship and marine animal movements and acoustic interactions, and acoustic tracks of individuals and groups of marine animals can be visualized and animated over regional and ocean basin scales. Real-time acoustic monitoring can now facilitate real-time management and conservation of marine animals.

Hatch said the IMCC sessions are designed specifically for a broad audience, including legislators and policymakers, resource managers, industry representatives, and interested members of the general public. Specialists in animal behavior, evolutionary biology, acoustic ecology, and physiology have also been invited to attend.

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On the Web:

International Marine Conservation Congress (IMCC):

<http://www2.cedarcrest.edu/imcc/program.html>

Researchers to Develop Ocean Sanctuary Noise Budget:

http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/press_release/2008/SciSpot/ss0804/

Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary: <http://stellwagen.noaa.gov/>