

Encroachment is a Two-Way Street

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For the past several years, all of the U.S. armed services have been confronting “encroachment,” civilian development near the fencelines of military installations as well as under low-level flights paths. Such development often leads to noise complaints by new residents or other property users, and it may increase the risk of accidents. Furthermore, new development often turns military ranges into islands of habitat, increasing military responsibility for protecting threatened and endangered species. Thus, encroachment has threatened the ability of ground troops to train and air services to operate.

While the Pentagon’s proposals to weaken several environmental regulations have received most of the attention from the press, advocacy organizations, and Congress, the Defense Department responded to encroachment on a much broader front. It launched scientific research into the environmental and community impact of its operations. It boosted programs for conducting land use studies in cooperation with local government. It developed systems for managing its natural resources sustainably. And perhaps most important, under what is now known as the Readiness and Environmental Partnership Initiative, it established partnerships with land trusts and local governments to create buffer zones, many of which also serve as protected habitat, around military facilities.

These programs—particularly the buffer zones—have been remarkably successful. Conservation organizations and many local governments are more than willing to partner with the Defense Department. Yet in many locations the armed services find themselves in direct conflict with community activists.

Therefore, the Center for Public Environmental Oversight evaluated public stakeholders’ views on encroachment and military range sustainability. In 2007 I visited Camp Lejeune, a major Marine Corps base in North Carolina, and Army facilities on O‘ahu, Hawai‘i. At both sites I met with community members and military range officials. In addition, in the course of my work I was contacted by community members near air bases such as Shaw Air Force Base (South Carolina) and the Key West Naval Air Station. Their complaint was additional noise resulting from changes in military air operations. I also heard from Colorado residents concerned about the planned expansion of Ft. Carson’s Piñon Canyon Maneuver Site.

Though activists and other concerned residents tend to support the military’s ventures into sustainability, they often tell a different story from Defense officials about encroachment. They appear most upset when the military expands its operations into new areas—that is, *where the armed forces are encroaching on civilian activity*. I did not try to referee disputes between the military and its neighbors. Rather, I sought to document community concerns, which are inherently influenced by subjective perception.

Camp Lejeune

Working with neighboring local government, Camp Lejeune has completed Joint Land Use Studies, leading to actions—such as the relocation of cell phone towers—minimizing encroachment on base operations. It has also acquired easements to prevent residential development on its boundaries.

But it has also expanded training into the neighboring community. In 1992, the Marines acquired the 41,000-acre Great Sandy Run Area (GSRA), just across U.S. Highway 17, along the main post's western boundary. About 1998 they began live-fire training there. Marine officials explain that prior to the opening of the range, tank units “had to travel to a number of remote and frequently expensive locations to accomplish essential training.”

Sandwiched between the northeastern edge of the GSRA and the main post, residents of Verona's High Hill Road are not happy. They complain of intense noise from Marine training. They say it feels like they are under fire, even at night. They believe that the noise or vibrations are damaging their homes.

Some of the families along High Hill Road have lived there since before Camp Lejeune was built during World War II. They are by no means anti-military. In fact, family members have seen combat in Iraq. But they find the noise from firing, explosions, and helicopter overflights to be unacceptable. And they consider the Marines' response insufficient.



Home on the range between the old and new sections of Camp Lejeune

The Marines, however, say that their noise monitoring shows that noise is not intolerable. When measurements showed that modeling had underestimated the off-site impact of tank guns, they say they moved the tank firing point further away. Smaller weapons are still fired from a site near High Hill Road.

Only a small number of families—residents of High Hill Road—have expressed objections to Marine expansion at Camp Lejeune, but in North Carolina’s Washington County average residents and politicians across the political spectrum have joined environmentalists in opposing the construction of a Navy Outlying Landing Field just a few miles from the Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, which provides habitat for vast numbers of migratory waterfowl. Even in this famously “pro-military” state, citizens are not happy with proposed encroachment by the military.

Army Facilities in Hawai‘i

Since its annexation of Hawai‘i about a century ago, the United States has seen the island chain as a strategic military outpost, halfway to Asia. Many Hawaiian political leaders, such as Daniel Inouye, powerful chairman of the Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, see military expenditures as an integral part of the Hawaiian economy.

But Hawaiians, particularly native Hawaiians, are ambivalent about the U.S. military. Activists convinced Washington to close the Navy’s bombing and gunnery range on the island of Kaho‘olawe, and through court action they have severely restricted Army training operations on O‘ahu’s Makua Military Reservation. Some of the same activists and attorneys have tied up the Army’s plans to build new facilities to support the stationing of a Stryker brigade on O‘ahu and the “Big Island” of Hawai‘i.

Even without the expanded requirements of the Stryker brigade, the Army describes a “tremendous land shortfall” on the islands. There is not enough land to provide complete training—by the book—to its troops. Though it has qualified troops for deployment, it considers current facilities—particularly with the Makua restrictions—unsatisfactory. It has undertaken two types of action designed to overcome the deficiency: expansion and the creation of buffer zones.

Expansion

First, as part of the Stryker basing plan, the Army has acquired 1,400 acres at Schofield Barracks, O‘ahu and added 23,000 acres to the Pohakuloa Training Area on Hawai‘i. Within the 23,000 acres, it has promised adjacent, affluent residents that it will restrict operations along their property lines—an internal buffer zone. In addition, it has acquired much smaller trail easements on both islands.

Critics of Army expansion raise many of the same objections raised by critics of development elsewhere. Increased operations will add to dust (from both construction and training) and traffic, and additional personnel will further strain O‘ahu’s tight housing market. Furthermore, I have found three key issues that underly opposition to the Army’s plans for Hawai‘i:

Sovereignty. Most Americans don't realize it, but the United States aided in the overthrow of the independent Hawaiian government of Queen Lili'uokalani in 1893 before annexing the islands as a territory in 1898. Some Native Hawaiians see the basing of troops there as an extension of more than a century of military occupation. Different groups have different views about the best way to restore some form of sovereignty, but many Hawaiians share in a suspicion of the military. As with Vieques in Puerto Rico, nationalism played a key role in the successful movement for the demilitarization, return, and restoration of Kaho'olawe.

Associated with the political movements toward sovereignty, many Native Hawaiians seek recognition and promote preservation of their religious and cultural practices. In particular, they want old religious shrines—heiaus—protected, and they want access to them. Since many are found in or near military training areas, each expansion rekindles their concern.



Marines train at the Army's Schofield Barracks Urban Assault Course

Footprint. Opponents of military expansion in Hawai'i feel that the military controls too much territory, particularly on O'ahu. One told me that the armed services control 27% of O'ahu's land. The Army alone accounts for 20%. I haven't independently verified the numbers, but looking at the map, they look reasonable. Another activists said, "They gave us back Kaho'olawe, but now they want almost the same acreage back again." In other words, the civilian population, not just the military, suffers a tremendous land shortfall. Some associate the large number of Native Hawaiian homeless, seen in tents along the beaches, with a military-exacerbated housing shortage. While some activists would prefer complete demilitarization, others simply want the military footprint reduced, with activities that can be conducted elsewhere, conducted elsewhere.

Process. The military's critics feel that the Army has repeatedly misused the environmental review process—the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Indeed, they have won a series of court victories against the Army. They describe a process that elsewhere has been called “decide-announce-defend.” Under this paradigm, the proponent of an action decides what it wants to do, and then it manipulates the environmental review process to support that decision. They say the Army shifts criteria, tailors data, and fails to consider alternatives. Even supporters of military expansion, such as Senator Akaka, have chided the Army for its NEPA practices. It's not clear that a better process would win over many of the staunchest critics, but it's clear that they gain politically and often win in court because of deficiencies in the Army process.

Buffer Zones

Second, under the Army Compatible Use Buffer program, the Army has partnered with the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, the Trust for Public Land, the North Shore Community Land Trust, and other civilian organizations to create buffer zones adjacent to the Kahuku Training Area, on O'ahu's North Shore. The Army contributed \$3.5 million to the purchases of an 1,875-acre parcel in Waimea Valley and \$2 million toward the acquisition of 1,129 acres at Pupukea-Paumalu. The Defense Department's Readiness and Environmental Preservation Initiative also provided over \$1.3 million for the latter. These are areas where controversial housing developments had been proposed.



End of the road in a North Shore residential neighborhood

In addition, the Army provided \$1 million toward the purchase of 3,716 acres in the Moanalua Valley, for habitat mitigation, and it is reportedly considering partnering in

a similar project at the Honouliuli Nature Preserve. Both areas support the endangered ‘elepaio, a native flycatcher.

Not surprisingly, the conservation organizations that work with the Army to create buffer zones and manage unique habitat have been impressed by the Army’s willingness to take on that environmental mission. Less expected, the opponents of expansion feel somewhat comfortable with the buffer zone program, as well.

For several years I have been arguing that the armed forces and environmentalists should unite against a common enemy: urban sprawl. With the recent buffer zone acquisitions, that strategy is working well in Hawai‘i. The activists who fear a growing Army footprint also fear commercial and residential development in inappropriate areas. Some, however, express suspicions that the Army might be doing a good thing to help win support for its more controversial projects. And one activist did express concern that buffer zones might be a form of expansion, if they allow the Army to move environmentally deleterious training closer to its existing property boundaries.

The Way Forward

Overall, the Defense Department’s buffer zone strategy is combating the impact of civilian development on military training and operations, but military leaders need to recognize that encroachment is a two-way street. Some conflicts arise because the armed services are adding land or expanding operations. There is no guarantee that a better environmental review process or a broader visible commitment to sustainability will satisfy all critics, but if the Defense Department continues to establish partnerships only with its “friends,” but not its critics, it will continue to face the critics in court or in the Congress. Taking the critics’ objections seriously might force the military to “go back to the drawing board” as it expands its footprint, but it also might lead to win-win victories.