"Military Cetology"

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Throughout the Cold War, the US Navy aggressively explored the sound-making and sound-detecting capacities of cetaceans to help it retain its supremacy in marine battle space. Whales, dolphins, and porpoises were engaged as animals that "see with sound," that produce sophisticated echolocation "clicks," and that harness the ocean's complex acoustic waveguide to detect signals thousands of miles away. Other scholars have touched on the navy's legacy in cetology (whale science), but none have made it their object of study. Our article places this relationship at the center of burgeoning engagements among media studies, sound studies, and marine spatial theory. We focus on the Cold War period, when new interests in submarine warfare facilitated the growth of naval interests in cetology. We understand the dynamic outcomes of these interests in terms of acoustemology—Steven Feld's concept for a theory of what can be known and experienced through situated sonic encounter. At stake in this account is not only the question of cetology's power-laden ways of engaging cetaceans but the role of sound in shifting conceptions of the ocean itself. (Text from authors' abstract)