

IMPACTS OF SEISMIC AIRGUN NOISE ON FISH AND MARINE INVERTEBRATES

1. What are seismic surveys?

Seismic airgun blasting is a process that the oil and gas industry uses to identify and map oil and gas deposits under the seafloor. A typical seismic airgun survey involves a vessel traveling in successive parallel lines while towing one or multiple airgun arrays. Seismic airguns release pressurized air bubbles to create powerful sound waves that travel through the water column and seafloor¹ and provide information on the geologic formations more than 6 miles below the seafloor.² These sound waves travel as echoes back to the sea surface, where they are captured by hydrophones.³

2. Why is seismic airgun blasting a problem?

Airgun pulses are loud, repetitive, explosive sounds and are the second largest source of noise energy in the oceans, behind military explosives.⁴ Loud blasts are repeated every 10-12 seconds for days, weeks, or months at a time. Noise from seismic airguns can travel over large distances because of its low pressure and high amplitude.⁵ The sea surface area covered by the largest towed seismic array is 21 times larger than the National Mall in Washington, D.C.,⁶ and seismic airgun blasts are so powerful they can be heard up to 2,500 miles from the source under some propagation conditions.⁷ As the sound waves from the individual blasts move away from the sound source, they merge into continuous low frequency noise pollution that drowns out other sounds in the ocean.

3. Seismic noise can have significant and wide-ranging impacts on fish and invertebrates, including species that are commercially important.

a. The biological impacts of impulsive noise from seismic airgun blasting

Causes severe physical injury and mortality. Research into the impacts of exposure to pile driving (which generates similar acute, high-intensity, low-frequency sound as seismic operations) has shown substantial damage to the internal organs of fish, including the swim bladder, liver, kidney, and gonads.^{8,9,10,11,12} For marine invertebrates, exposure to near-field low-frequency sound may cause anatomical damage. Strikingly, zooplankton abundance was found to decline by up to 50% (in 58% of the species examined) up to three quarters of a mile from a single airgun source (volume: 150 cubic inches) in 24 hours following exposure; krill larvae were completely wiped out.¹³ Both immediate and post-exposure mortality of copepods has also been observed close (within 10 m) of the seismic source.¹⁴ Pronounced sensory organ (“statocyst”) and internal organ damage was observed in seven stranded giant squid after nearby seismic surveys.¹⁵ Exposure of scallops to seismic signals was found to significantly increase mortality, particularly over long periods of time.^{16,17}

Damages the hearing and sensory abilities of fish and marine invertebrates. For fish, the high-intensity of airgun emissions may damage hair cells and cause changes in associated hearing capabilities. Exposure to repeated emissions of a single airgun caused extensive damage to the sensory hair cells in the inner ear of the caged pink snapper; the damage was so severe that no repair or replacement of hair cells was observed for up to 58 days after exposure.¹⁸ Rock lobsters were found to experience severe

statocyst damage that resulted in reflex impairment (demonstrated by the ability of a lobster to right itself); these effects persisted for up to 365 days post exposure and did not improve following moulting.^{19,20} Significant statocyst damage was also observed in the spiny lobster and persisted for an entire year following exposure to seismic airgun blasts.²¹ It was hypothesized that the devastating impacts of a single seismic airgun on zooplankton was, at least in part, due to severe statocyst damage.²²

Impedes development of early life history stages. Early life history stages of some groups of fish and invertebrates can be more susceptible to the impacts of underwater noise than older life stages.²³ Repeated exposure to nearby seismic sound caused slower development rates in the larvae of crabs²⁴ and scallops.²⁵ Lesions on the sensory cells of squid and cuttlefish appeared 48 hours following noise exposure in adults, whereas the same degree of damage was observed immediately after exposure in hatchlings.²⁶ Seismic activity has also been anecdotally implicated in larval recruitment declines.²⁷

Induces stress that physically damages marine invertebrates and compromises fish health.

Experimental seismic noise has been shown to affect primary stress hormones (adrenaline and cortisol) in Atlantic salmon²⁸ and European seabass and Atlantic cod have shown elevated ventilation rates, indicating heightened stress, in response to seismic surveys;^{29,30,31} elevated stress hormones and chemicals have also been recorded in sea bass following airgun exposure.³² Invertebrates may exhibit common immune suppression and compromised ability to maintain homeostasis, with similar responses observed in scallops and spiny lobsters up to 120 days post-exposure,^{33,34} potentially affecting the long-term health of associated fisheries.³⁵

Causes startle and alarm responses that interrupt other vital behaviors, such as feeding and reproduction.

Airgun discharges elicit varying degrees of startle and alarm responses in fish, including escape responses and changes in schooling patterns, water column positions, and swim speeds.^{36,37,38,39,40,41,42,43,44,45,46} During seismic surveying, reef-fish abundance declined by 78% during evening hours when fish habitat use is usually highest.⁴⁷ Startle and alarm responses have been observed in captive fish several kilometers from the sound source, with European sea bass and the lesser sand eel responding at distances up to 2.5 and 5 km from a seismic source, respectively.^{48,49} Field studies suggest that airgun exposure can lead to schools of some fish species to move lower in the water column,^{50,51} change their horizontal and vertical position in the water column more frequently,⁵² increase swim speeds, change diel movements in the post-survey period,⁵³ or move away from the sound source.⁵⁴ Squid have been observed to shelter in the quiet area near the ocean surface.⁵⁵ Startle responses are also commonly observed in marine invertebrates; jetting and inking – behaviors typically induced by ambush predators – have been observed in squid,^{56,57,58} scallops have shown a distinctive flinching response in response to airgun signals and persistent alterations in reflex behavior following exposure,^{59,60} and oysters close their valves and stop feeding.⁶¹

Change predator avoidance behaviors that may reduce probability of survival. Airgun exposure may have population-level implications if predation rates increase due to sound-induced behavioral changes. Scallops, rock lobster, and spiny lobster were slower to right themselves after exposure to airguns, increasing their chance of mortality from predation.^{62,63,64} Saithe, a species of marine fish, became more

dispersed following exposure to seismic airgun noise, potentially increasing vulnerability to predators.⁶⁵ Some fish and invertebrates may become habituated to sound and show fewer responses over exposure trials;^{66,67,68,69} however, habituation may also make individuals less sensitive to predatory cues and increase their vulnerability to predation.⁷⁰

Affect catch and abundance of commercial important species. If an animal is affected by seismic sound, associated catch may also be affected.⁷¹ For example, commercial trawl and longline catches of Atlantic cod have been shown to fall by 45% and 70%, respectively, five days after seismic surveys in the Barents Sea.⁷² Similar reductions in catch rates (52% decrease in catch per unit effort relative to controls) have been demonstrated in the hook-and-line fishery for rockfish during seismic discharges off the California coast.⁷³ Impacts appear to be species-specific and depend on catch method. Commercial catch rates of 15 species harvested using two gear types following a seismic survey in Bass Strait, Australia, were found to be higher for some species and lower for others.⁷⁴

b. The biological impacts of continuous low frequency noise pollution produced by seismic surveys

Damages the hearing and sensory abilities of fish and marine invertebrates. Continuous noise physically damages hair cells in fish ears^{75,76} and the sensory receptors of marine invertebrates, including octopus, squid, and cuttlefish, that are responsible for their balance and position (known as “statocysts”).^{77,78,79} This damage can lead to permanent or temporary hearing loss in both groups.^{80,81,82,83,84,85,86} Young individuals appear to be most sensitive; three species of cephalopod hatchlings showed more severe lesions in less time (almost immediately after sound exposure) than adults.⁸⁷ Even temporary loss of hearing or sensory capability can compromise an individual’s chance of survival and the important role that they play in the larger marine ecosystem.

Induces stress that physically damages marine invertebrates and compromises fish health. When exposed to continuous noise, marine invertebrates, including prawns and mussels, produce stress chemicals that degrade their DNA, alter gene expression, damage proteins, elicit an immune response, and impair vital functions such as oxygen consumption and filtration rate.^{88,89} Fish, including seahorses, exhibit increases in ventilation and metabolic rate^{90,91,92,93,94,95} and release stress chemicals, such as cortisol,^{96,97,98,99} following noise exposure. Noise-induced cortisol exposure can compromise the long-term health of the individual.¹⁰⁰

Masks (‘drowns out’) important biological sounds essential to survival. Many fish communicate using frequency ranges that overlap least with the natural background noise of the ocean.^{101,102,103} Similarly, the sensory systems of marine invertebrates are attuned to natural background noise conditions. Continuous noise pollution raises the background noise level and reduces the distance over which individuals of a species can communicate with one another,^{104,105,106,107} which can have negative consequences for survival and reproduction. In addition, call rates and call complexity of fish assemblages were found to be significantly higher in low-noise environments relative to environments exposed to regulate regular motor boat noise, indicating community-level effects.¹⁰⁸

Reduces reproductive success, potentially jeopardizing the long-term sustainability of fish populations.

Noise can mask courtship vocalizations necessary for successful mating^{109,110} and can also disrupt social behaviors such as nest-digging, antipredator defense, and other social interactions necessary to successfully rear young.¹¹¹ Gobies and damselfish spend less time caring for their nests under noisy conditions,¹¹² female common goby spawning decisions are delayed by a reduced ability to assess male acoustic signals resulting in decreased spawning probability,¹¹³ and common goby males exposed to noise had significantly fewer egg clutches and eggs hatched earlier than under ambient conditions.¹¹⁴ Nesting success of the oyster toadfish was significantly lower in areas where their mating calls were masked.^{115,116} Exposure to noise during spawning resulted in a significant reduction in total egg production and fertilization rates, which reduced the total production of viable embryos by over 50%.¹¹⁷ Startle responses and faster yolk sac consumption have been observed in newly hatched Atlantic cod, which then grew to a smaller size than hatchlings not exposed to noise; this demonstrates that noise can impact survival related measures during development.¹¹⁸

Interrupts feeding behaviors and induces other species-specific effects that may increase the risk of starvation, reducing reproduction, and alter community structure.

Increased noise has been found to lead to significantly less foraging activity in fish, as individuals are startled,^{119,120,121,122} take shelter,^{123,124,125} or undertake an escape response.¹²⁶ Seahorses abandon habitat when exposed to transient motor boat noise.¹²⁷ The common cockle also suspends feeding and buries deeper into the sand in response to noise.¹²⁸ Disturbance from noise can force fish to feed at night when prey availability is also lowest,¹²⁹ which also results in an altered and likely sub-optimal diet composition.¹³⁰ In cases where fish and crabs are still able to locate prey, noise results in an increase in food handling errors and a reduced ability to discriminate between food and non-food items, consistent with a shift in attention.^{131,132,133,134} Interruption of natural behaviors may, over the long-term, disrupt important ecosystem processes, such as the nutrient cycling carried out by sediment-dwelling invertebrates.¹³⁵

Increases risk of predation of fish and marine invertebrates, reducing survival and reproduction, and altering community structure.

Response time to predators was significantly slower and the type of anti-predator behavior more variable in hermit crabs¹³⁶ and Ambon damselfish¹³⁷ exposed to noise. European eels were 50% less likely and 25% slower to show a startle response to an 'ambush' predator, and were caught more than twice as quickly by a 'pursuit' predator;¹³⁸ eels in poor condition were more likely to exhibit these behaviors than healthy individuals.¹³⁹ Shore crabs exhibit a 'freeze' response to noise, making them more vulnerable to predation from natural predators.¹⁴⁰ Noise can increase the foraging success of predatory species less affected by noise; for example, more than twice as many prey were consumed by the dusky dottyback in field experiments when motorboats were passing compared to ambient conditions.¹⁴¹

Compromises the orientation of fish larvae with potential ecosystem-level effects.

Most settlement stage fish move towards the component of coral reef noise that is produced by marine invertebrates, as a means to orient towards suitable settlement habitat.¹⁴² The number of settlement stage coral reef fish larvae that moved towards a recording of natural coral reef with boat noise added was found to be 13% less than the natural sound alone. In addition, 44% moved away from the noise playback compared to

only 8% during the natural reef playback.¹⁴³ Overall, fewer fish settled to reefs with added boat noise compared to reef noise alone.¹⁴⁴ Coral reefs with man-made noise showed an increased diversity of species and increased abundance of certain taxa of juvenile reef fish.¹⁴⁵ In the lab, settlement-stage larvae (~20 days old) exposed to man-made noise developed an attraction to that noise rather than the natural noise of the reef, whereas wild-caught larvae showed an attraction to reef noise and responded adversely to man-made noise.¹⁴⁶ Noise pollution can therefore affect the natural behavior of reef fish at a critical stage in their life history, and can disrupt the community composition of natural ecosystems.¹⁴⁷

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