

## Enamored of Clamor

You are invited to partake in an experiment. The first step is exceedingly simple. Don't panic: no test tubes, microscopes, laboratories, or reactive chemicals are involved. All you have to do? At some point in the day, just stop; whatever you are doing, stop doing it. Sit. Be still. Very, very still. Quiet your breath and quiet your mind. Open your ears. What do you hear? A radio? television? people talking? children playing? dogs barking? Try to identify and quantify everything that is going on in your aural environment.

Part Two of this little trial is still quite easy: turn off whatever news, music, and entertainment sources are within your reach; respectfully ask those around you to be quiet for a moment too; give your dog the "down and stay" command. Now repeat the steps above. What fills the air this time? Chances are, even if you have eliminated the obvious noises around you, there are still plenty being generated. Electric clocks, computers, refrigerators and freezers, water pumps, the drone of traffic, honking trucks, a distant train. Make note of all the less obvious sources of noises and try to distinguish among them.

A din, hum, buzz, purr, whirr, or whine filling our ears has become a part of life. In fact, we are so accustomed to an ambient racket that, until we consciously stop to think about it, we rarely or barely notice that it is a constant accompaniment to our daily rhythms. So the next phase of the experiment may be a bit more difficult and will, perhaps, require a bit of creativity on your part: visit a place with as few manmade distractions as possible and where the sounds of Nature prevail. Close your eyes so that you can focus only on the sounds surrounding you.

How difficult was it for you to find a site where you could immerse yourself in the songs of the birds, the plunking of falling acorns, or the chug-a-rump of a bullfrog? Did you find that even a place you were confident would be free from synthetic noises was, instead, occupied by technology's triumphs?

Have we become so inured to the audio muddle in our lives that we no longer detect it? What once would have seemed a violation of our tranquility is scarcely noticed as our threshold of acceptance increasingly climbs up the decibel scale. You can count quiet among the endangered species of our natural resources; add noise to water, air, and light on the list of pollutions.

Just what is noise pollution? By its very simplest definition, it is any unwanted sound. Historically, the word noise is derived from the Latin word *nausea*, which finds its roots in the Greek *nausia* or *nautia*, seasickness.

Most often, noise pollution is attributed to urban development. It is a simple step to connect the sounds associated with transportation, industry and manufacturing, residences, rock concerts). However, noise pollution is increasingly finding its way into the domains of what heretofore was considered sacrosanct and immune from violation from extraneous sounds.

Our society has come to a point where it seems afraid of silence, of feeling naked in a quiet world. In public areas, the elevator, the doctor's office, a restaurant—there is a perceived necessity to pipe music to us. Our entertainment world abhors a noise void too: do movie theaters that brag about their super speakers come to mind? Or how about a television documentary that is cluttered with music? In our recreational lives, we are, again, assaulted by extraneous reverberations: ski areas blare music up the slopes; hockey arenas fill every pause in action with a pounding beat. Even on a more personal level, people *choose* to permeate their experiences with superfluous sounds: notice how many walk or jog with stereo headphones crammed into their ears!

*But the Lord is in his holy temple;  
Let all the earth be silent before him.*

—Habakkuk 2:20

Unlike water and air pollutions, which leave particulates and sediments behind to measure, noise pollution is ephemeral; when the sound ceases, so does its quantifiable existence. This, coupled with the fact that tolerable levels of sound are subjective, make it a difficult contaminant to evaluate. Compounding the problem of assessing this pollutant are the subjective qualities of it: tolerance levels for noise vary among individuals.

Hearing loss is the most obvious physical manifestation in humans of noise pollution. But living with loud noises can create numerous other health consequences. As a biological stressor, it can affect the entire physiological system. Physical symptoms that result from exposure include an increase in both heart and breath rates, tensing of muscles, a rise in blood pressure, the release of adrenalin into the body, and a change in blood chemistry.

Humans certainly are not the only living creatures impacted by the noises of our creation. Wildlife, both on land and in water, suffers from contact with them. There are many variables—the quality of the noise, its duration, the species affected, habitat type, sex and age of the animal, previous exposure, the season and its associated activity, and the presence of other stressors

(e.g.; lack of food or water)—that converge to form the animal's response to noise. The loss of hearing acuity can interfere with an animal's ability to secure food, its capacity to hear predators, and its natural methods of communicating with others.

Physiological and behavioral changes in the creature can range from relatively mild, such as an increase in heart rate or the traveling of short distances, to more severe, such as fleeing in panic. Furthermore, reactions to these loud noises can cause an animal to injure itself or expend critical energy needlessly. The vigor of a species can be threatened through compromised health due to a decrease in appetite or food intake or abandonment of habitat; even the reproductive faculty can be impaired due to effects on metabolism and hormonal balance.

If we continue to become deafened both literally and figuratively to the extent and magnitude that we generate noise, not only do we jeopardize our own quality of life, but we also harm the innocent lives of those with whom we share this planet.

Let us all try to become thoughtful neighbors, whether we live next door to a family of people or a family of wrens, and become aware of the noises emitted from our households. And let us not only think twice before we turn the volume button on the stereo to the halfway point on the dial . . . let's also consider not turning it on at all! See if you find that silence can be golden—especially at Lake Millen!

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