desperately seeking Silence

ALL GORDON HEMPTON WANTS IS ONE SQUARE INCH OF SILENCE. IT JUST MIGHT BE ENOUGH TO MAKE OUR NATIONAL PARKS WILD AGAIN.

Gordon Hempton tiptoes across the cobbles along the Hoh River in Olympic National Park. The clang of elk antlers echoes through the predawn chill, but the rutting bulls have disappeared. Silently, Hempton heads after them—up a game trail, through sword fern and sorrel—dropping to his knees at the base of a gigantic Sitka spruce. Less than 20 yards away, in a copse of vine maples, he hears elk browsing: soft snorts, snapping branches, the munching of leaves.

Hempton cocks his head, stares intently into space, and switches on a tape recorder in his knapsack. For the next half-hour he is so transfixed by this breakfast chorus—Roosevelt elk, winter wrens, ravens, and the Hoh's distant hum—that he all but misses another rival bull passing within spitting distance as it approaches the harem. A bugle splits the calm, provoking a staccato warning in reply. Hempton grins and nods in thanks toward the departing elk. A good day's work.

Hempton tracks sound. With "Fritz," a binaural microphone the size and shape of a human head, he has circled the globe in search of bird song, insect buzz, and river roar. He has dedicated himself to preserving nature's pure voice before it is lost to a cacophony of human-made sounds. It's a race against time. When Hempton began recording 19 years ago, he thought he would have at least two decades to capture the natural soundscape before mechanized noises invaded. Sadly, he was wrong.

In a 1984 survey of Washington State, Hempton found 21 sites with noise-free intervals of 15 minutes. Today only three remain. The loss cuts straight to the soul, Hempton says: "Hearing pure nature is a striking experience no less grand than staring at the Milky Way. It jerks us right out of our daily lives. Without it we are diminished, as individuals and as a civilization."

Hempton, who lives with his wife and two children in Port Angeles, Washington, declared himself an acoustic ecologist before he knew what that meant. After graduating from the University of Wisconsin with a botany degree, he set out to make his mark as a scientist. An Iowa storm distracted him. In 1981, exhausted on a solo cross-country drive back to graduate school, he pulled off the road and stretched out on a patch of grass surrounded by cornfields. Hempton listened to the wind blowing over him, then the thunder pounding and the rain pelting, hearing it all as if for the first time. That storm became the experience by which he measured his life.

"It didn't measure up," he says wryly. He dropped out of graduate school a few months later. Within a year he had bought his first recording equipment. Although he knew no one who was professionally recording natural sounds, Hempton accepted that as his mission. He began seeking advice, pouring out his heart in a torrent of letters to natural resources professionals, bioacoustic experts, academics, musicians—anyone who might have an interest. Only the avant-garde

by Jane Braxton Little
AUDUBON

photograph by Rex Rystedt

More poem than political statement, it tracks Hempton as he hears the hymn of the earth awakening.

The attention that video drew to the loss of quiet helped Hempton launch One Square Inch of Silence, his plan for saving the soundscape of America's national parks. The proposal calls on Congress to designate one square inch in each of 10 national parks as zero-tolerance zones for human noise. Devilishly simple in concept, this minuscule set-aside has enormous ramifications. To eliminate the drone of a generator, several square miles would have to be noise-free; to eliminate the roar of an airplane, tens of square miles. Imagine no more air tours of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park or Grand Canyon, Hempton says wistfully; no more helicopters in Mesa Verde or tour buses in Yosemite.

Among federal bureaucrats, One Square Inch evokes chuckles and regrets. "This system doesn't function that way," says Bill Schmidt, a natural resources representative for the National Park Service. "I don't know how we'd deal with it as a practical matter."

Still, Schmidt says, Hempton's documentation of the steady decline of noise-free intervals has won serious attention from the Park Service. A new manual expected this year will guide park managers to curb the racket produced by their own operations, as well as the noise visitors generate. It's a start, says Hempton, but it may be too little, too late. While the dawdling Park Service spends millions collecting data on how much noise visitors will tolerate, songbirds have a hard time hearing one another's warbles over the din. "A tax is being usurped on our health and well-being—and on the environment," Hempton fumes. "If we continue to manage national parks so they no longer have the ability to transform us, we'll all go to hell fast."

Within the small community of natural-sound recorders, Hempton is a maverick. While other professionals are seeking solo voices in isolation, Hempton seeks the full natural choir, with all the distance and space of an actual outdoor listening experience. In contrast to academically trained scientists, who identify every sound by precise location and species, Hempton's documentation is lax. What he offers in place of scientific accuracy is an aesthetic perspective that encourages people to listen to the environment around them, take note of what they hear, and enjoy it, says Greg Budney, a curator at Cornell University's Library of Natural Sounds.

But Hempton is obsessive about detail. For a computer golf game

national seashores, and other sensitive and pristine public lands. Excepted would be flights for emergencies, research, and construction and maintenance activities.

10. Support a global nighttime curfew. Hundreds of airports already have curfews, but local curfews only shift the problem elsewhere.

11. Develop a high-speed rail alternative to flights of less than 500 miles. Redirect government investment from airport expansion to high-speed rail, and support efforts to quiet rail transit.

12. Ban commercial Super Sonic Transport flights from U.S. airports and block proposed corporate SST flights from U.S. airspace.

13. Support quieter, cleaner aircraft technology, called Stage IV.

14. Avoid solutions that shift noise. A fairer distribution might make sense for many airports, but moving the noise around doesn't solve the problem and divides people who should be united.

—Les Blomberg

Les Blomberg is executive director of the Noise Pollution Clearinghouse, which maintains an exhaustive library and network at www.nonoise.org. From The New Rules *(Winter 1999). Subscriptions: $35/yr. (4 issues) from the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, 1313 Fifth St. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55414; www.ilsr.org.*

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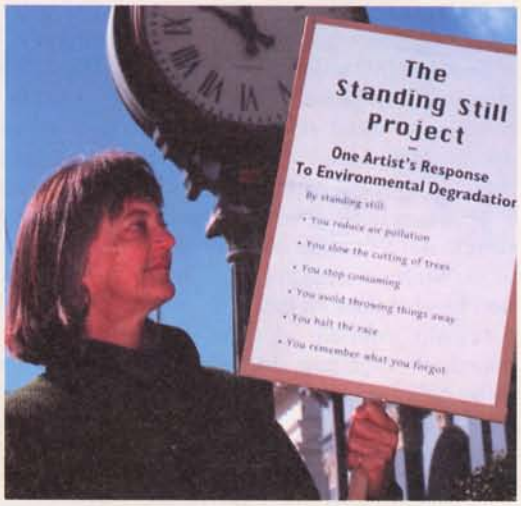

The Standing Still Project

According to Erica Fielder, environmental art teacher at the College of the Redwoods Mendocino campus, by standing still, you: reduce air pollution, slow the cutting of trees, stop consuming, avoid throwing things away, halt the race, and remember what you forgot. Erica stands still regularly on Main Street in Fort Bragg, California.

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at the Speed of Sound

To listen well, slow down

Our hearing puts us on the map, and is intimately tied to our sense of balance; both come from the same source within our bodies. We listen in a way that tells us about the dimensionality of our world. Our culture, though, is dominated by sight. Thousands of images flash across our minds in an hour of television or the Internet. The result of this external visual bombardment is that we have become habituated to this quick pace and are impatient with other rhythms. But seeing and listening are different. Seeing is light, which moves much faster than sound: 186,000 miles per second, as opposed to 1,088 feet per second. To listen, you must slow down and operate at the speed of sound rather than at the speed of light.

To listen is to develop an inner silence, not a familiar habit for most of us. While we often pay great attention to what goes on inside us, what is actually required, a kind of disciplined self-forgetting, does not have to be difficult. You do not have to retreat to a monastery or be converted to some new belief. But you have to do some deliberate work to cultivate settings inside yourself where it is possible to listen:

• Recognize how you are listening now. Generally, we are not really conscious of how we listen. Listen first to yourself and to your own reactions. Try to identify what you feel more carefully and directly.

• Notice what you are thinking. Focus your thoughts on someone you care about. Almost immediately, you may find that you are flooded with images of that person. Your memory is a powerful force in how you perceive those around you. To listen is to realize that many of our reactions are stored reactions, not fresh responses at all.

• Listen with more humility. This typically means coming down to earth and connecting what we think with the experiences that lead us to think it. We are often unaware of the extent to which we assume that what we see or hear is what is there.

• Listen for sources of difficulty, whether in you or in others. Instead of looking for evidence that confirms your point of view, look for what challenges it. Listening becomes reflective: You see how others experience the world.

• Listen for the gaps between what you do and what you say. No one acts consistently with his or her words, but some of us are more aware than others of how large and systematic this gap is.

• Be still. By quieting the inner chatter of our minds, we open up to a way of being present that cuts through everything. Think of this as calming the surface of the waters of our experiences so we can see below to the depths and receive the meanings that well up from within us. These creative pulses may move in us, but often we are too busy to pay attention. Stand still, and you will feel and know them.

—William Isaacs

Adapted from Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together. *Copyright 1999 by William Isaacs. A Currency book, published by Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc. Reprinted with permission. A version of this essay appeared in* New Age Body&Soul *(2000). Subscriptions: $24/yr. (6 issues) from P.O. Box 1949, Marion, OH 43305.*

SILENCE, *continued from page 79*

sound track, he went beyond the twitter of birds and the moaning of wind to include the patter of golfers hitting balls two holes away and the tinkering of a maintenance crew in a nearby shed. To prepare for a sound portrait of Yosemite National Park based on John Muir's journal descriptions, he hiked Muir's 1868 route from San Francisco to Yosemite and even ingested some nearly inedible biscuits he made from Muir's recipe.

His search for sound-rich habitat requires stoicism and epic patience. He has waited days in Australia for the willie wagtail to sing, hiked miles along Washington's Rialto Beach for just the right log to amplify the crash of Pacific waves on stones. Emerging from a knee-deep stream at the base of a waterfall in Olympic National Park, where he held Fritz deep inside a rock grotto for 20 minutes, Hempton raises one eyebrow and remarks mildly that the water is "so cold I'm surprised it flows."

He immerses himself in unspoiled sounds out of personal passion. He records them out of a New Age conviction that they can cleanse souls, even save them. Yet for all his poetics, Hempton is a savvy businessman. "One Square Inch of Silence is a marvelous moniker. I kick myself for not coming up with it," says Bernie Krause, a California-based sound recorder.

Hempton has recorded nature's drama: crocodiles, eagles, wolves. But his ultimate quest is for the entire scape of sounds, the space around the dominant voice that gives it authenticity. Crouched on a moist mat of hemlock needles and moss, hoping for an elk to bugle across the forest, he hears instead a soft September breeze stirring in the treetops. Hempton holds Fritz with one hand, raises the other like a conductor, and rolls the tape. A mountain chickadee serenades the setting sun. The wind song swells and subsides. Hempton is radiant, knowing he is preserving another of nature's elusive miracles.

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