

## Sound Off

What are your autumn memories and traditions? Making favorite soup recipes? Taking in a film festival? Bagging a deer, antelope or elk? Tailgating with friends at a football game? Fall has arrived. What a beauty, with Indian Summer prolonging outdoor playtime against a multi-colored display of foliage. It's hard for me to imagine living somewhere that doesn't have distinct seasons. As the temperatures cool, it's a "hygge" time of year, as the Danish would say, a time of cozy, of quiet, before the hullabaloo of the holidays.

But quiet, as it turns out, is a more and more precious commodity. If the ambient sounds in your place of work are a distraction (HVAC, Muzak, intercom), if the sounds in your apartment complex or neighborhood (leaf blowers, revelers, sportscars' vroom) are a source of frustration, you're not alone. Raise your hand if you can hear traffic from your house. Too much of anything is not good for us.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has set a standard for a 24-hour exposure limit for noise levels at 70 dBA — measured in decibel units (dB) and A-weighted (dBA) to adjust for human hearing. Some OSHA sites say 80 dBA spanning an eight-hour period for workers is acceptable while others say 90 is tolerable. The urban residential ideal is 45 to 55 dBA but is more and more difficult to achieve given how noisy we have become. The soundproofing of houses under construction is trending. Creating noise-absorbing green space between new developments and busy roads is a popular notion, but what booming community is willing to give up space for housing given the fill-in and build-up-not-out pressure placed on builders by municipalities? Unwanted residential sounds are masked by white noise piped into rooms, strategically placed automated water features outside, or deflected by high, impervious walls. To put noise pollution in perspective, a vacuum cleaner, leaf blower or hair dryer produce a noise level of around 80 to 90 dBA. Normal conversation — 60. Distant traffic is 70 to 75. Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Missouri, registered 142.2 at a game in 2014. That's the equivalent of standing next to a jet engine at takeoff. Chronic exposure to unsafe levels of sound has been shown to be a primary cause of deafness in older generations, never mind a host of stress-related issues at all ages.

We have been fed such a steady diet of distracting noise we can feel disoriented without it. I shopped in Natural Grocers recently and was initially thrown by the absence of piped-in music, of special deals announced over the intercom, of the artificially created sense of cheer and hubbub. But I then realized what a pleasure it was to hear only the unadorned sounds of people shopping. In some respects, we've become dependent on noise, get nervous when it's too silent. No wonder we can't hear ourselves think. The popular reaction to this realization has been a growing appetite for silence and learning how to be comfortable with it. Activities like forest and moon bathing or vacationing in remote resorts predicated on, and charging plenty for, helping their clients unplug and get quiet are proliferating.

What these noise problems have in common are the ever-rising din of man-made sounds. What the solutions have in common are soul-nurturing natural soundscapes. In the name of progress, we are unwittingly overwhelming the sounds of Nature. Nobody knows this better than Emmy-winning acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton. His documentary (and book by the same name)

"One Square Inch of Silence" recounts Hempton's search for locations where the chirps, yowls, hoots and splashes of nature are the sole sounds. He was able to identify only 12 locations remaining in the United States where his breathing was the solitary measurable noise. Of those he divulges just three, keenly aware of mankind's propensity to love to death the very things that are critical to holistic survival. One is the Hoh Rain Forest in his home state of Washington. "Anonymity," says Hempton, "becomes the only viable protection." Astoundingly, he discovers that one preserved square inch of wildlands' intricate cacophony affects, by association, 1,000 square miles.

It's no secret Nature's symphony brings us more in tune, that clanging towns render us off key. "Natural silence is our nation's fastest-disappearing resource," warns Hempton. Before International Noise Awareness Day on April 25, let's give one inch of high desert over to noise protection and watch it take not one but 1,000 square miles.