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Noise, the 'ignored pollutant': health, nature and ecopsychology

Paul Mobbs

9th March 2017

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The sonic backdrop to our lives is increasingly one of unwanted technospheric noise, writes Paul Mobbs. And as it eclipses the sounds of nature, it's taking its toll on our health, wellbeing and quality of life. So as well as campaigning for more trees, and quieter cars, trucks and aircraft, what's to be done? Let us seek out calm moments of quiet tranquillity - and listen to the birds.



The Rolright Stones in North Oxfordshire, not far from Paul's home town of Banbury. Photo: Cyrus Mower via Flickr (CC BY-NC-ND).

> Human interaction with nature is an absolute essential for well-being. Walking out into a dark morning to sit in a hedge and listen to birds may seem a strange route to health, but the evidence is that it works.

A few days ago I went for a walk, well before the dawn, in order to listen to the 'dawn chorus'. It's something I like to do a few times a year, especially in the early Spring when the birdsong is at its loudest.

I've been doing these walks since before my teens. Over that period there's been one inescapable change in the countryside around my home town of Banbury - noise.

In many ways the modern urban-dweller has become immured to noise; we exclude it, and bar it from our thoughts - a process even more challenging since the advent of the personal stereo and the mobile phone. But we never truly escape it.

For those who like to enjoy the natural environment, noise is something to be escaped from within the relative sanctuary of the landscape. These days that's getting harder and harder to accomplish.

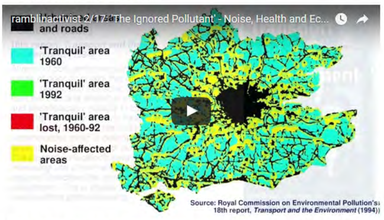
That's not only because of noise from all around - in particular from urban areas, roads and the increasing mechanisation of agriculture - but also due to the increasing level of air traffic overhead.

Bird song is good for you

Walking out before the dawn my objective was to reach Salt Way, which fringes the south-western quadrant of Banbury. It's the old Roman salt route from Droitwich to Buckinghamshire, which has existed since long before the town itself, and which links to the more ancient prehistoric Portway and Welsh Road trackways.

Due to its age Salt Way has exceptionally dense, wide and species-rich ancient hedgerows which demarcate it from the surrounding fields.

Perfect for listening to birds. Except on that morning, as even before rush hour the easterly breeze was wafting the sound of the M40 motorway from over two and a half miles away, on the other side of town.



That got me musing on an interesting paper by Cox et al., 'Doses of Neighborhood Nature', which I'd just read in the journal *Bioscience*.

In the study the researchers were able to demonstrate a positive correlation between the quality of people's everyday experience of nature, and a lower prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress. These results build upon a wealth of other similar studies which have appeared over the last few years - part of the growing fields of ecopsychology.

One of the principal metrics the study used to assess the 'quality' of a persons natural experience was the afternoon abundance of birds. While that doesn't strictly correlate to where I am now, stood in the gloom of a pre-dawn byway, I think the comparison was valid - given the louder and intense levels of birdsong I was able experience.

Noise and nuisance

If 'natural' experiences are good for you, does the inverse effect hold true? - that urban noise is bad for you?

The damage of noise to society has been acknowledge in English law since Henry III introduced the concept of 'public nuisance', almost 800 years ago. Urban environments can also create negative health effects, especially in terms of stress and mental health.

Generally what many research studies find is that our recovery from the stresses of everyday life tends to be better, and takes place faster, when we are exposed to green landscaped spaces or less noisy natural environments. Difficulty is, that's getting harder to do these days - the result of higher urbanization globally.

Banbury is a growing town. Immediately to the west of the section of Salt Way where I was sat, the construction of a few hundred houses was about to commence. Permission for another thousand was recently granted on the opposite side of the main A361 road. To the north another five hundred are being planned or built, and another 2,500 are being added to the southern edge of the town right now.

That doesn't just mean that the species rich hedgerow along Salt Way will be severed from the countryside by urban development - perhaps reducing its diversity in future.

As each year passes, it takes longer to get to the outside of the town; and progressively harder to escape the 'noise' envelope of the town as its larger size generates higher volumes of traffic and thus noise.

But aren't cars are getting quieter?

Road vehicles are not the only significant source of noise. Eg, for those of you who drink instant coffee, the occasional hiss of high pressure steam that radiates out across Banbury is created by your caffeine craving - as the leading brands are made here in Europe's biggest coffee plant.

The common misapprehension about road noise is that it's about motorized vehicles. In fact, unless the vehicle has a mechanical fault, a large part of the noise comes from the tyre's contact with the road surface. Hence the use of many more electric vehicles would still give rise to significant road noise.

As a briefing from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology noted in 2009, while the noise emitted by cars has reduce by eleven decibels since 1970, there has been no associated reduction in the road noise generated. That's because tyre noise is difficult to tackle, and also because traffic volumes have significantly increased, meaning there are more tyres making noise.

Here in Banbury we also have another problem - aircraft. It's a lot less 'acute' than it was, since the USAF's jet fighters left their local base in 1994. However the trans-Atlantic air corridors for south-east England and middle-Europe cross the skies above North Oxfordshire. At certain times of the day, particularly morning and evening, the 'chronic' level noise from above is almost constant.

The invasive nature of that noise was highlighted in 2010 when the Eyjafjallajökull volcano erupted. I went for a walk and there was something glaringly different about the landscape. Then I realized: no aircraft noise - the result of the flight ban.

The effect was stunning, stirring, and unfortunately short-lived.

What we're talking about here is lost 'tranquility'

In 2010 the new coalition government conducted a 'bonfire of the Quangos' - closing or merging many of the government's advisory and expert bodies. For me one of the most significant was the abolition of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP).

Since 1970, RCEP had produced some of the UK government's best, and most politically embarrassing academic studies on pollution and the environment - from nuclear waste to soil protection.

In 1994, RECP produced its ground-breaking 18th Report on *Transport and the Environment*. Against the background of the Government's road building programme of that time, the contents were inflammatory - and increased the level of protests against new road construction.

In that report there were two maps which showed the level of 'tranquility' - the area of countryside unaffected by road, aircraft or urban noise - in the south-east of England. One map showed the 'tranquil' area in 1960, the other in 1992. Subtracting one map from the other you realize the level of 'tranquil' countryside which was lost over that 30-year period.

In their conclusions RCEP stated,

"Noise from vehicles and aircraft is a major source of stress and dissatisfaction, notably in towns but now intruding into many formerly tranquil areas. Construction of new roads and airports to accommodate traffic is destroying irreplaceable landscapes and features of our cultural heritage."

The importance of ecopsychology to environmentalism

It would be easy to reduce this to an issue of car tyres, or the encroachment of urbanization. Instead what environmentalism has to grasp are the clear messages about human well-being which are emerging from ecopsychological research.

Climate change is abstract. Air pollution, except under extreme conditions, is abstract. Yet studies which examine the fundamental psychological human dependence upon the natural environment can tell us something which, for many, is directly appreciable.

Talking about wellbeing, or the the stress- and anxiety-reducing qualities of green space, might seem a distraction from the perilous ecological challenges of our time. That is a far too limited perspective:

- If we deal with road noise, by reducing the use of road vehicles, or reducing their speeds, we affect both air pollution and climate change.
- If we increase green spaces, and take greater care with how the urban fringe is managed, then we improve people's ability to access nature and increase their well-being - and we also begin to address issues such as biodiversity loss and landscape fragmentation.
- More than anything, increasing people's awareness of the natural environment would increase society's valuation of it - and their propensity to change to protect it.

A few years ago I write a briefing on ecopsychology as part of a series on how lightweight camping/backpacking could be a means to address lifestyle sustainability - and allow people to adapt/develop the skills to live lower-impact lifestyles in their own homes as a result.

A focus on ecopsychology as part of local environment campaigns, especially for children, could be equally transformative - particularly as current economic and political trends are questioning the value of 'big' ecological issues such as climate change.

Small is, after all, beautiful?

That morning, walking to the top of Banbury's local summit, Crouch Hill, the sun rose through a cloudy horizon. All around the noise level had been growing steadily as the rush hour approached and the roads filled with vehicles.

Moving beyond that requires more than a change of transport policy. What it requires is a realization that human interaction with nature is an absolute essential for well-being.

Far more than just changing your diet or going to the gym, contact with nature is a mechanism to find ourselves as 'whole' people; part of our environment, not shielded or walled away from it.

Walking out into a dark morning to sit in a hedge and listen to birds may seem a strange route to health, but the evidence is that it works.

Paul Mobbs *is an independent environmental researcher and freelance author. He is also the creator of the Free Range Activism Website, FRAW*

A fully referenced version of this article is available on FRAW.

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