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# A voice for silence

**One man, writes John Balzar, thinks quiet may be Earth's most endangered natural resource.** By John Balzar Times Staff Writer

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There are only seven or eight quiet places remaining in the United States.

Fewer than 10. In the entire nation.

Barely more than half a dozen in all the parks, wilderness, refuges and "wild" spaces that we treasure.

Fewer all the time.

Quiet is going extinct.

These thoughts turn over in the mind as you explore one of these few quiet places left in North America, perhaps the quietest of them all. Your guide is a man who has given his career to listening and recording the pure sounds of nature — and searching for meaning in what they convey.

He has become one of the few Americans to raise his voice on behalf of the vanishing quiet.

Naturally, your purpose here is to inquire about the value of this timeless thing that is slipping away without … well, without alarm, without a sense of loss, without broad public discussion. But something else occurs along the way. When you enter the realm of quiet to ponder it, the quiet awakens in you a missing bond with the natural world. The quieter the surroundings, the more — and the better — you hear. The world around you expands into a three-dimensional place.

Listen.

No need to strain. Just listen.

That is the autumn sound of yellowed maple leaves falling from the tree and settling on the forest floor 50 feet away. It is a sound you've never consciously heard. More to the point, it is a sound you didn't know you could hear.

It sounds faintly like nature giving itself a gentle round of applause.

Spiritual balm

"QUIET is the think tank of the soul."

His name is Gordon Hempton. He lives alone at the end of a road on the edge of Olympic National Park in far western Washington state.

He travels with a hand-held sound meter, a tape recorder and a rubber mannequin head named Fritz, who has a microphone embedded in each ear to pick up sounds binaurally exactly as a human does. He also carries a brace of cameras, because he loves to record how nature looks as well as what it says.

"Discovering nature is self-discovery."

He is 52 now, educated as a botanist, and he's been making his livelihood as an acoustic ecologist, recording the sounds of the wild, for 16 years.

These are not heavily edited recordings for the impatient listener who wants highlights of wolf howls or loon cries. These are audio portraits of nature as it really sounds, at nature's own tempo.

Hempton traveled around the world to record the subtle sounds of daybreak. He followed the Merced River to record the quiet of nature as John Muir might have heard it. He recorded a collected symphonic soundscape of the state of Washington.

"Quiet is the presence of time undisturbed."

He has produced 60 compact discs, most of them still in distribution, and won an Emmy for the sound recording of a PBS documentary about his work, "Vanishing Dawn Chorus."

The highest compliment a listener can pay him is to don earphones, tune into his nature recordings and drift asleep.

"Hearing is our surveillance system. Hearing doesn't have a blind side. We don't need any instruction; our hearing tells us when we are in a secure, peaceful place. So when someone listens to my work and nods off, I say, 'Yes, I know what you mean. I've been there.' "

At a whisper

GORDON Hempton is as rare as the thing he cherishes. For starters, his commercial recordings serve only as an invitation and would never fulfill an MBA's idea of the products of a worthy business plan. "If people like what they hear, they can come out here and get more for free," Hempton says.

On the trail he seldom talks, never willingly and always at a whisper. In his company, heightened awareness fills the void of conversation. That is the gift he gives, and it requires no explanation.

Drip. Chirp. Flutter. Crackle. Rap-rap-rap. Applause. Put variable and generous pauses between those sounds. And sprinkle in other knocks and rustles and whooshes that aren't quite distinct enough to evoke clear description.

It is strangely simple: Hearing the living forest requires nothing more than the sensibility to listen, and the quiet background to make it possible. Oh, and one thing more: a listener must be of the type to like his, or her, own company.

Last night Hempton set the stage: "Quiet allows the time for us to be undistracted. Ultimately and always, we find ourselves. And we're better for it."

He arrives in his van at the Hoh River trail head in the morning, as he does a couple of times each month. He wears a cherished purl-knit wool sweater, carries a shoulder bag and forgoes rain gear for a cheap umbrella. His face is barely lined by age, his features hawk-like.

There is a sharp clicking sound: The hooves of elk traversing the blacktop parking lot into a downfall meadow beyond. A herd of 20 materializes out of the mist and trees, followed by another clicking herd of equal size, including a bull and a few spikehorns. The elk rip and chew into the forest, their teeth grinding and crunching on wads of wet greens, their mouths slurping.

Quick breaths, soft snorts. A calf bays for its mother. The animals' breathing stops; ears rotate. Elk may be on the lookout for trouble, but they rely foremost on their hearing. They resume grazing.

Hempton walks into the forest, a miniature figure under soaring hemlock, spruce and fir.

It rains 12 feet a year here in the Hoh River Valley. Even when it's not raining, the moss in the trees drips water so regularly that it might as well be. When the tendril fingers of ocean fog part and beams of sun reach the valley, vapor clouds rise from the moist forest. The Hoh is an adventure in wet. And with the wet come the ferns and the quilt covering of greens that soak up sounds.

Walk. Listen.

Hempton's professional sound meter records a hush that can be equaled almost nowhere else on the planet except inside a heavily insulated and suspended sound studio.

For three hours he walks, stopping often.

In just this short time of listening, your ears become so acute that you find yourself trying to hear whether tongues of fog licking the forest canopy might make their own subtle music. When the trail wanders near the Hoh River, the white noise of moving water becomes almost unbearably loud.

At last, at a place marked by a red stone and a spruce with a hollowed-out trunk big enough to walk through, Hempton turns left off the trail. He picks his way over downed trees, through a squishy salamander bog and up a bank to a glen of mighty conifers. He sits.

A glass candy jar, resting on moss under a log, is the only sign that humans have ever been here.

"Welcome to One Square Inch," says a label on the jar.

Hempton chose this place to make a stand.

If he can stir up a ruckus, maybe the right people will listen and the National Park Service will officially designate just one square inch of this park as a place of absolute quiet. One square inch of quiet, of course, means miles and miles of buffer — essentially securing the natural soundscape of the entire park.

A simple idea. Turn off the generators in those RVs, reroute the airline traffic going into Seattle, forbid private planes overhead, and plaster the visitor center with posters reaffirming the mission of our national parks: to preserve nature as it was, quiet included.

Inside the glass candy jar are messages. Visitors to One Square Inch are invited to write a short meditation regarding quiet. Only those willing to make the walk will read them.

Hempton will sit on his one square inch for an hour.

The serenity he restores in himself will last for days afterward.

"Quiet is like a vitamin. Vitamin quiet."

Hempton defines quiet this way: "Quiet places are where you can go and listen and not be distracted by human-caused noise."

By that definition, standing near a waterfall can be quiet, even though it is also loud.

For short intervals, a minute or two, there are hundreds of places where one can find quiet outdoors. But Hempton counts only those where the sounds of nature are unbroken for intervals of at least 15 minutes during daylight hours.

It's not entirely an arbitrary designation. Fifteen minutes is the length of a tape on his Nagra IV-S sound recorder.

By that definition, there are no quiet places left in all of Europe — he's chased a number of false leads over the years. In the entirety of the continental United States, there are only seven or eight such places.

In remote areas, jetliner traffic is the biggest intruder. And to pilots or passengers who claim that one cannot hear a jet overhead at cruise altitude, Hempton will play a tape to convince them that they simply are not listening when they are on the ground.

What saddens Hempton is the "rate of extinction" of quiet places. In 1984, when he recorded the sounds of Washington state, he found 21 truly quiet places. Less than a decade later, only three remained.

Reducing quiet to science and numbers is not a terribly meaningful guide. The decibel scale is logarithmic and makes sense chiefly to an expert.

Heavy traffic on a roadway can reach 120 db. A tree frog in the rain forest croaks at 49 db when heard at a distance of 20 feet. The rip of a Velcro fastening can peak at 99 db from a foot away. A raindrop falls onto the page of a notebook with a 32.5-db splatter — although it sounds more like the thwack of a fastball hitting a catcher's mitt if your ears are attuned to quiet.

Stopping at one grove of moss-draped trees far from the river, Hempton records the hush of the forest at 23.5 db.

Later he will remark of such quiet, "That's phenomenal. It rivals anything anywhere."

Learning to listen

FOR several years, Hempton taught a class called "The Joy of Listening."

He recalled one woman's ambivalence about attending. She was losing her hearing and wondered, why bother?

"Afterward she told me that she was hearing more, even with her impaired hearing, than she ever had."

So how does one teach listening, or learn it?

It would be glib to say that a first step might be to stop talking. Accomplish that and there will likely be an awakening — at the least, a recognition of how many other people on the trail have lost the capacity to be quiet, let alone enjoy it and restore themselves.

Hempton's advice is practical: Put in foam earplugs for half an hour. Take them out and you'll immediately detect enriched sound.

Or walk with a young child as a guide. Before children are sent to school and made to "pay attention" — that is, filter out every sound except the teacher's voice — they are naturally attuned to their surroundings.

We are, after all, animals — and animals rely on sounds as the 360-degree tripwires by which to make their way and survive.

For the same reason, Hempton says, the constant exposure to noises — the racket of traffic, machinery, entertainment, helicopters, sirens, crowds — overworks our inborn audio radar.

We end up filtering out our environment, but we cannot entirely shut down our defense system. It is the worst of both worlds, leaving us to stew in perpetual anxiety and stress.

Statutory and regulatory law generally describes harmful noise as that which results in hearing loss. A more down-to-earth definition might define it as the aggregated clamor that deprives us of peace of mind.

Exquisite rarity

WITH Hempton's ideas in your head, you sit on a log near the candy jar that marks One Square Inch of quiet.

Last night's rain drips slowly out of the moss. A raindrop falls many times in this forest: from the clouds to a treetop, from there to the moss of a branch, then down to another branch; finally, 10 hours later, it is released the last 100 feet to the crown of your hat, where the splat is so vivid as to give you a start.

A half-hour. A woodpecker sends a drumroll through the glen. The skitter of a squirrel is almost noiseless. Almost, but not quite. What is the word for the sound of tiny claws on saturated moss?

Quiet.

A faint birdsong, lovely but inexplicably curtailed.

More quiet. Here and there the flat splatter sound of weeping trees. A crackle of something moving. A long interval of soundlessness — so long that the faraway hiss of the Hoh finally enters your consciousness. The mighty woodpecker breaks the spell with another drumroll from the heavens.

A practiced listener, Hempton hears a symphony in this glen. As a novice, what you hear is not yet decipherable as music. But it is consuming, and unexpectedly

suspenseful. In the silence, the whisper voice of nature speaks.

It is the rarest of things.

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