

# THE SOUND

# OUTSIDE

## HOW CLOSE CAN TECHNOLOGY GET US TO THE NATURAL WORLD?

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Listen. The wind is in the treetops, swaying with the sound of a delicate rustling. Birdsong fills the air. Not your cup of tea? Try a shoreline instead, waves crashing at your toes. *Crash, then quiet.* Exhale.

For the stressed-out among us, this type of exercise probably rings some bells. If you've downloaded a meditation app or attended mindfulness gatherings, you've likely undertaken similar excursions to imagined places in the name of tranquility.

(Or, maybe [rainymood.com](http://rainymood.com) is more your vibe. It's a good one.)

There are suggested evolutionary explanations for why humans are so drawn to natural sounds—a babbling brook and chirping birds would have communicated safety and supplies of food and water. In hearing these sounds, we feel at ease in our bones as much as in our minds.

The human proclivity to record nature follows right along. (A particularly whimsical early example is a BBC broadcast of a 1924 duet between a cellist named Beatrice Harrison and the local nightingales from her garden in Surrey, England.) But popularity really began to pick up when the production of portable tape recording devices (first developed and used to report from the front lines of World War II) made field recordings possible. In 1948, the record label Folkways was founded to document sound from around the world. For a taste: *Sounds of the Sea, Vol.*

*1: Underwater Sounds of Biological Origin*, containing early hydrophone (basically, a submerged microphone) recordings, was released in 1952; *Sounds of North American Frogs* in 1958; and *Sounds of Insects* in 1960, featuring butterflies and dragonflies in flight, beetles traversing a rose, and insects chewing on a snack, accompanied by narration containing bits of information about each insect and sound.

It wasn't until September of 1969, at the dawn of the environmentalist wave of the 1970s, that nature recordings joined the mainstream. Enter: *Environments*, a quirky 11-album series that presented various soundscapes of the natural world billed as better than the real thing. The origin story goes: *Environments* creator Irv Teibel was helping avant-garde filmmaker friends by recording the sound of the crashing waves at Coney Island's Brighton Beach. In the editing room, Teibel became entranced by the audio loops; the repetition relaxed him. Here launched Teibel's 10-year mission to record all manner of places with unique sonic offerings—his Manhattan apartment, windows flung wide during a thunderstorm; Georgia's Okefenokee Swamp, a remote wetland only accessible by airboat; the aviary at the Bronx Zoo.

But beyond cataloging, Teibel sought to perfect. He edited, collaged, and spliced different times and places together on one track, and adjusted audio levels. Within the series, titles allude to dreamscapes

rather than true-to-life landscapes. Take, for example, *The Psychologically Ultimate Seashore*, followed by such titles as *Alpine Blizzard* (no telling which), *Caribbean Lagoon* (where, one wouldn't know), and *Ultimate Thunderstorm*.

With *Environments*, the goal was less to portray nature as it was, but rather, the nature of our rosiest-hued dreams, an imagined nature as a product for human enjoyment. *Environments* delivered a welcome dose of relief to city folk navigating cacophonous urban soundscapes—its tidy, meticulously manicured format was a handy tool they could reach for whenever they needed a so-called “Sonic Tonic.” On the back of the first release, there are quote bubbles from enthused listeners: “Apartment never seemed so pleasant before!” “Better than the real thing!”

Realistic or not, people were listening now—their ears and imaginations tuned toward nature with a sense of curiosity and wonder. One year after Teibel's perfected ocean hit record shelves, *Songs of the Humpback Whale*—bioacoustician Roger Payne's recordings of the complex and varied vocalizations of humpbacks—sold over 100,000 copies and launched the “Save the Whales” movement. A few years later, these sounds would go to space on the Golden Record aboard the Voyager spaceships.

Today, the work and missions of acoustic ecologists, organizations like EarthEar and the World Forum for

Acoustic Ecology, and environmental sound artists carry Payne's flag—recording sound with the hope of stimulating awareness about the landscapes they come from. Gordon Hempton's sonic “portraits” of the world's disappearing quiet places, Jana Winderen's compositions of the planet's dwindling coral reefs, and Mileece Abson's “sonified” botanic biorhythms and bioelectric emissions imagined as a means to cultivate empathy towards the natural world all occupy a fascinating intersection between Teibel's artistry and perspective and the urgency triggered by living on a planet being shaped by a changing climate. What happens when the places from which restorative recordings are produced become endangered? What happens without the trail or the ice or the forest?

A few weekends ago, I stayed in a cabin deep in the Angeles National Forest. Quite literally over the river (stream, in this case) and through the woods, we arrived after six miles of trekking through white sage-scented trails. Later, tucking in for the night, someone in our group began to snore. I reached for my phone—though it had no service whatsoever—popped my headphones in, and opted for “Wind in the Trees” (*Environments 5*, 1974), in homage to the landscape that surrounded our slumbering cabin. I soon drifted off to sleep. As it turns out, Irv Teibel created the sound of that wind in my ears using a synthesizer. I wouldn't hold it against him.

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NASA captures recordings of outer space in which actual electromagnetic readings are converted to soundwaves, translating howling planets and roaring waves of plasma into ghostly sounds our ears can recognize.

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Leonel Vásquez' series of mechanized sculptures *Canto Rodado* (a play on words since “canto” means both song and pebble in Spanish) conjure the sound of water on river rock to “bring the voice out of the stone” and tell the history of a Colombian river sucked dry by human intervention.

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Environmental recordings reading list: Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*, whose narrator is a ghostwriter for a man obsessed with NASA's Golden Record (which sent the sounds of human life into space), and Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*, about a couple recording city soundscapes.

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