

Communal Listening for Climate Action

Dr. Garth Paine

Professor of Digital Sound and Interactive Media, School of Arts Media and Engineering, Arizona State University
Garth.Paine@asu.edu

Celia Yang

PhD. Candidate, School of Arts Media and Engineering, Arizona State University
tyang107@asu.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a new initiative to establish a community-embedded Environmental Listening Network that teaches environmental listening skills and conducts regular free listening events, building local listening communities. Using a network of key partnerships, including the USA national libraries network, led by the ASU Library, this ambitious project also has the support of the Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory¹ which seeks global solutions to climate impact. In that context the Environmental Listening Network aims to center those solutions in local communities, building environmental awareness by sharing a set of simple yet powerful methods of environmental listening worldwide. An Environmental Listening Field Guide is in development for broad distribution in support of community organizers and practitioners.

This approach draws on a history of acoustic ecology, soundwalks and listening practices and responds to several challenges in finding approachable and affordable strategies for empowering individuals and communities to address climate impact. Environmental listening can be practiced daily, wherever the listener finds themselves, developing a deepening awareness of the subtleties of the ecosystem(s) in which we live. As individual action is increasingly amplified by social media, the empowerment of individuals is one of the most powerful ways to achieve climate action, individual behavior must change.

We propose that environmental listening is an effective strategy for bringing about these changes and a key tool in addressing climate impact. The Community Environmental Listening Project envisions a future where, through acoustic ecology, people embrace their presence on the land on which they live to understand and foster a balanced ecosystem.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a time of climate change, where environmental impact is taking place all around us, it is important to understand our place and role in the health of our environment. Environmental listening is a unique opportuni-

ty to be *here, now*. To be truly present in the place in which we live, to contemplate its richness, its diversity and its fragility. We truly believe that through changing the way we listen, we can change the way we are in the world, and subsequently change our impact upon the environments of which we are part.

People hold the power to influence change, and individual action is the most powerful way to achieve it. On a daily basis we can take collective action to deepen our environmental awareness – awareness of the places in which we live, the impact we have on it, and the transformations we observe in it. This is a catalyst for change. Environmental listening is a simple tool that can profoundly strengthen these very sensibilities. When practicing we are simultaneously conscious of our context, our place within the ecosystem and like other practices of directed attention (breath meditation for instance), environmental listening brings us into the now, the very moment of practice.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL LISTENING

Environmental listening is an opportunity to stop for a few moments and focus our attention on the sound of the immediate environment. Environmental sound forms a unique signature – an acoustic niche [1] – of all the species that live in that ecosystem and communicate with each other using sound (the vast majority of all species). In other words, it gives us an indication of the inhabitants of the environment, and over time, an indication of changes in the environment and the health of that environment. Practicing environmental listening allows us to become more aware and embedded in the ecosystems in which we live. Whether they be remote, natural environments, or rural or urban cities, they contain a unique sonic signature that communicates something about place and through listening practices, belonging.

3. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

3.1 Why an environmental listening community?

The Community Environmental Listening initiative is

the first step in building a national and international practice of environmental listening. We envision that over time the local groups that gather to practice environmental listening will form a sense of community through their careful attention to the sonic qualities of the world around them, feeling more situated in the places we live, and more attentive to its diversity and fragility. We hope that individuals will build environmental stewardship and a sense of agency, in addition to strengthening collaborations and partnerships among community stakeholders, especially the national libraries network, led by the Arizona State University (ASU) library who will lead the engagement of local libraries across the USA in establishing Environmental Listening groups. Furthermore, we hope that over time these communities will interact to form a global community of environmental listeners. We are stronger together and change must come from all of us.

3.2 Why does it matter?

We believe this project is timely – it helps address climate change at a local and community level - we each need support in this endeavor. By forming a national and international community of environmental listeners we can encourage each other, report our experiences to each other, and as is necessary, campaign for changes in the ways we use our environment, or changes in the way we design our environments. We can promote local solutions to help bring about a soundscape that matches our desires, that supports our wellbeing and that supports community, rather than one often full of unconsidered or ill-considered sounds which mask the natural beauty and interconnectedness of the species surrounding us all, and possibly negatively impact our health and wellbeing² - a balanced acoustic ecology.

4. THE ENVIRONMENTAL LISTENING FIELD GUIDE

We would like to acknowledge that there is a huge body of literature on acoustic ecology, and specifically on listening, and references to modes of listening from several different perspectives [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. This range of practices, that are active in our communities today, are powerful forms of collective, listening.

This project does not seek to replace or overlook those practices but aims to make a simple and straightforward model for communities to engage with environmental practice as a tool in addressing climate impact/action. As such it is a simplified set of three listening modes, and an exercise regarding, the language – language limitations, in terms of talking directly about sound – a model therefore that we hope is easily taken up in the broader community without the academic dis-

course and inquiry that often goes with the other forms of practice mentioned above.

The Community Environmental Listening model focuses on three main listening modes: Passive Listening, Directed Listening and Active Listening. They are presented and taught in this order because it allows us to first focus on the sonic properties of the entire environment and become aware of our ability to be a consciousness listening (Passive Listening), then we aim to listen to detail, a microscopic investigation of a single sound (Directed Listening), and then to listen to the sonic relationships surrounding us, the acoustic ecology as a whole (Active Listening). The three principal modes of environmental listening each has its own rewards and challenges, but together they form a personal toolkit for environmental listening. They direct our listening from a global form of perception to a highly directed/targeted form of environmental listening, through to a way of listening to interactions in the environment in which we sit.

This listening toolkit is designed to be practiced on a regular basis, whether that be for five minutes at a time or an hour or more. This will attune individuals to the richness of the ecology around them, whether in an urban, rural, or wilderness environment. Rather than welcoming some sounds as acceptable and others as unpleasant (noise), we understand that they form a whole, but also that we contribute to that ecology and perhaps, that there are ways in which we may choose to amend our contributions, to tune the acoustic ecology in alternative ways.

When practicing each of these listening modes, we suggest finding a place to sit quietly, close your eyes and direct your entire attention to listening. In the following section we will outline the three listening modes and briefly touch on their heritage.

4.1 Passive listening

Passive Listening builds on similar practices such as Global listening [5], addressing our attention to all sounds around us without focusing our attention on any sound – to hear the entire acoustic gestalt as a singular quality – the atmosphere of the sounding world in which we are present. In this exercise, focus your listening beyond the sounding sources to hear their combined texture. You will notice when practicing this skill in different acoustic environments that this ambient signature is remarkably different. You will hear the cumulative energy of the world around you.

One challenge of this exercise is to not allow your attention to be drawn to any single sounding source but to listen beyond sources to the ambient texture. It's difficult to do that as we naturally listen for change – listening for danger or for affirmation of the world surrounding us. Here we need to put aside those biological norms and listen beyond the sources to the whole.

² See https://www.who.int/europe/health-topics/noise#tab=tab_1, viewed 01/07/2023

4.2 Directed listening

Directed Listening builds out of practices such as focal listening [5] and reduced listening [7] and encourages us to direct our attention to a single-sounding source and to examine every detail as if through a sonic microscope. Place your listening out in the world at the source of the sound and listen for every micro detail; the roughness or definition of the edge of the sound, the depth, and density of the sound, its weight/mass, its patterns of repetition and variations, etc.

Here you are listening in an analytical way really trying to investigate the sounding properties of the source sound you have chosen. Note also your ability to place your listening external to your body, at the source of the sound regardless of how far away it is. Note also that if your chosen sound source moves beyond your hearing, you have a listening horizon, beyond which you struggle to hear the detail, but also note how the low-frequency sounds travel further - they come to you from beyond the horizon and only the high frequencies that provide the detail seem to fade away as the sources go beyond your listening horizon.

4.3 Active listening

Active Listening builds on semantic listening [7] amongst other practices and is a combination of both previous skills. In this case, you are moving your attention around the acoustic environment, listening to the conversations of animals around you, hearing the interactions, perhaps also hearing the reverberation of the buildings or the echo of a canyon, hearing how the geography or built fabric of the environment interact with the sounds, the birds call or aircraft overhead, listening to how all aspects of the environment become interdependent and make up the acoustic ecology in which you are present.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL LISTENING AND CLIMATE CHANGE

5.1 Climate impact

Climate change has significant impacts on the natural environment and the sonic environment. As temperatures rise, it can affect the behavior and distribution of animals and birds, altering the acoustic density of an area. The changes in temperature and precipitation can affect the timing of bird migrations, leading to shifts in the sounds of bird songs in different seasons. Rising sea levels and increased storms and flooding can also lead to changes in the sound of water, changing wave patterns or the sounds of flooding. By listening to the sounds of our environment, we can better appreciate the changes that are happening and take action to protect the natural world for future generations.

5.2 Encouraging community engagement, placemaking, stewardship, and agency

Ezra Klein commented recently on his New York Times podcast³ that “We are not going to legislate enough, quickly enough to stop climate change, that cannot be the only path; so then what options are left, what options do we have if politics fails?” As a society we have been too slow, too risk averse to move forward, too scared to upset others, to change the balance of power, the status quo, the very thing that has led us to this place, facing a climate catastrophe. Climate change is clearly a national and international issue. Discussed as something that only the nation states can deal with. Something of such enormity that we as individuals are seen as largely powerless. We must reduce our collective carbon emissions by 7% in 2022. In a world where individual action is increasingly amplified through social media and the ability for self-publication, it stands to reason that one of the most powerful ways forward then is to empower the individual.

As was the core of the “think globally, act locally” movement of the early 1970’s the power of change rests with the people, the individual, driving collective actions through the simple act of living, and being conscious of the place in which we live, the environment, the impacts we have on it and the transformations we observe taking place. Here and now. This is the catalyst of change. The Community Environmental Listening initiative includes a straightforward toolkit that deepens ecological awareness, enhances sensibilities, and immerses practitioners in the present moment. The communities will be supported by an Environmental Listening Field guide and a web portal. In addition, existing community embedded institutions (starting with the libraries network) have committed to supporting Community Environmental Listening groups. Though this is an ambitious project excellent institutional support is offered in each community in addition to a program of train-the-trainer workshops and ongoing educational support resources. Through active engagement with the practice of listening to and in our environment, we cultivate a profound sense of belonging within the ecosystem, forging a distinct bond with the immediate experience of environmental listening.

In summary, we propose that environmental listening can be a powerful tool for encouraging community engagement, placemaking, stewardship, and agency in the face of climate change. By listening to the sounds of the world and learning through experience about the impacts of climate change, we may identify ways in which we, individually and collectively can contribute to positive environmental outcomes.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the Community Environmental Listening initiative provides a simple listening tool kit, supported

³ See <https://www.nytimes.com/by/ezra-klein>

by a Field guide, a program of training community leaders, and a network for support with the intention of encouraging communities of environmental listeners to meet on a regular basis, not only to be more present, and embedded in their own ecosystems, but to work together to promote stewardship around environmental issues, whilst building broader community engagement with individual climate action.

Environmental Listening is both a practice of directing our attention to the acoustic ecology and of more deeply connecting with the living ecology and the sonic sources that make up that symphony of sound. Environmental listening is a key to perceiving the health of the environment as well as its complexity and richness. The environmental listening groups are tackling the most critical ecologically issues affecting climate change and sustainability. We seek to empower individuals to use listening practices to engage and participate in the world we live in and believe that revitalizing that link is key to protecting global habitats. We want to change how people listen, help drive positive behavior change, and maintain a healthy and stable environment.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge the support of the Narrative Storytelling Initiative and the Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory at ASU and the ASU Library.

7. REFERENCES

- [1] B. L. Krause, "The Niche Hypothesis: *A virtual symphony of animal sounds, the origins of musical expression and the health of habitats*," *The Soundscape Newsletter* 06., June, 1993.
- [2] R. M. Schafer, *The soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world*, Rochester, VT: Destiny; 1993, 1993.
- [3] S. Feld and K. H. Basso, "Senses of place," 1st ed. ed. Santa Fe, N.M.: [Seattle]: School of American Research Press; Distributed by the University of Washington Press, 1996.
- [4] A. McCartney, "Soundwalk in the park with Hildegard Westerkamp," *Musicworks*, vol. Explorations in sound, no. 72 Fall, pp. 6-15, 1998
- [5] P. Oliveros, "Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice," Universe, Inc., 2005.
- [6] G. Paine, "Ecologies of Listening and Presence: Perspectives from a Practitioner," *Contemporary Music Review*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 362-371, 2016
- [7] M. Chion, *Audio-Vision Sound On Screen*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.