

Listening for Silence

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The Hoh Rain Forest is one of the largest temperate rainforests in the United States. Situated within the Olympic National Park in western Washington State, the Hoh is protected from commercial logging and is a haven for old-growth Sitka spruce, western hemlock, coast Douglas-fir, big-leaf maples, and black cottonwoods. Far from trafficked roads and the unremitting bellow of development, the Hoh remains one of the quietest places in North America.

Acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton defines silence not as the absence of sound, but as the absence of noise from modern life. For thirty-five years, Hempton has been documenting the sounds of the Hoh and its many species: Pacific tree frogs, Roosevelt elk, northern spotted owls, the red-breasted nuthatch, Pacific wrens.

But even the remote Hoh is increasingly polluted by noise. Planes fly over the rainforest en route to Seattle, emitting a dull roar that punctures the silence of the landscape.

Hempton believes that silence, everywhere, is on the verge of extinction.

When we first heard of Hempton and his work, we were instantly intrigued with the idea of creating a virtual reality experience to explore Hempton's notion of silence. As visual as the medium of virtual reality is, with its 360-degree cinematic canvas, our approach with this film was driven primarily by sound. How could we offer the viewer a chance to experience the Hoh Rain Forest through Hempton's way of listening, giving the sounds their own voice? This question became our motivation. Our virtual reality film, *Sanctuaries of Silence*, provides an immersive experience into the Hoh Rain Forest, inviting the viewer to listen alongside Hempton and consider what would be lost in a world where silence has gone extinct.

Listening through a microphone taught Hempton to take things in with equal value, without judgment. We were struck by this, and as we joined Hempton in this practice, we found

that we were completely present in the landscape and deeply connected to the space around us. We were surprised by the intricate sounds of life, from the creaking trees to the cacophony of birdsong filling the forest. We felt attuned to nature in ways we hadn't experienced before.

Our hope with the film and these listening exercises is that you come away with a new perspective toward sound and the power of silence. The simple act of listening to the natural world can profoundly impact our relationship to place, rooting us in a presence that we otherwise often take for granted.

We invite you to participate in a five-step practice of listening—an opportunity to experience place through sound. These exercises could be done over the course of a day, a week, a month. Try to listen without judgment and simply be present, open, and curious.

Start of Practice

“If you are going to listen, you have to be willing to change.”
—Gordon Hempton

1. Where is the place you spend the most time indoors? Go to this place. It could be a room in your home or your office. Sit or lay down in a comfortable position. Spend 10 minutes with your eyes closed, listening to all of the sounds around you, nearby and far away. What do you hear?

2. Seek out a public or urban environment—a local coffee shop, a busy street corner, your rooftop. Again, for 10 minutes, listen to the sounds around you. Try to take it all in, with equal value, without judgment. What do you notice?

3. Find a natural/green space within your town or city—a public park or garden or a tree in your yard. Close your eyes and listen for 15 minutes this time. How is the quality of sound different in this location compared to the location in exercise #2?

4. Seek out a natural space, away from the hustle and bustle of the city. This space could be a wooded trail or a meadow with a stream. Sit or lay down with your eyes closed. For 30 minutes, listen to the sounds around you. What do you hear in this place?

5. Return to the place indoors from exercise #1. Repeat the first exercise. Has your experience of listening changed? If so, how?