

Noise is more than an annoyance; it is one of our most serious environmental problems. And unlike some forms of pollution, it is getting worse, not better. By some estimates, urban noise is doubling every ten years. Air traffic is increasing by 5 percent a year. More and more loud devices like leaf blowers and jet skis are coming into use all the time. Silence is simply disappearing from our world.

Noise Has Grave Consequences

Hearing loss

According to one survey, almost 9 percent of Americans suffer from permanent hearing loss. For those over 65 the proportion rises to 25 percent. Regular exposure to loud noises is a leading cause.

Stress and illness

The body reacts to noise as a signal of danger. The blood pressure rises, the heart rate increases, breathing speeds up, muscles tense, and adrenalin is released. This occurs even in sleep, and even fetuses are affected.

Noise causes stress, and stress is a major cause of illness and suicide.

Loss of community

Noise prevents people from communicating. On busy streets, near major airports, and in many gathering places such as night clubs, noise makes conversation difficult or impossible.

Studies have shown that people are less likely to help a person in distress on a noisy street than on a quiet one.

Aggression and violence

Noise is often used to take power. Unmuffled motorcycles and boom cars are a way of appropriating space and denying its enjoyment to others.

Every year there are more conflicts between those who feel that they have an unlimited right to make noise and those who assert their right to quiet. This conflict has led to violence and even murder.

Cruelty to animals

Pets in many stores and homes suffer from loud music from which they cannot escape.

Animal life in the oceans is regularly being exposed to 200 dB blasts of sound from scientific experiments. Fish-farms use underwater horns to drive away seals.

Our Overstimulated Society

Modern society is hooked on noise. Almost nowhere can one find a shop, restaurant, mall, or even doctor's office free of piped music, radio, or television. Practically every form of indoor recreation is accompanied by pounding music; outdoors, joggers and skiers use personal stereos to keep silence at bay. Movie theatres promote their 'big sound.' On television, even documentaries are accompanied

by non-stop music. We are exposed to acoustical stimulation at unprecedented levels, and as the effect of each stimulus weakens, the dose must be increased.

People growing up with little experience of peace and quiet come to equate silence with boredom. Passive forms of entertainment take up an ever greater part of life. Even social gatherings are often little more than group exposure to music and TV.

Myths About Noise

"You can get used to it."

We can cut off the sight of the outside world by closing our eyes, but hearing is a 24-hour-a-day system. Whether or not we are listening to the sounds around us, our ears continuously transmit signals to the brain and nervous system.

"It's the price of progress."

Existing technology can significantly reduce sound emissions from vehicles and other machines. Intelligent and well-regulated use of noisy devices could dramatically reduce their impact. Much other noise can be eliminated simply by more thoughtful behaviour.

"It's my right to make noise."

The soundscape is part of the commons, the property that belongs to all of us. No one has the right to pollute it with noise any more than they have the right to pollute the air or water with chemicals.