

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Noise: The Death Knell of Peace and Quiet

By Keith Hammer

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Peace and quiet is disappearing from our landscape at an alarming rate, largely due to the noise created by motorized vehicles and gadgets we can often do without. Most of us can rake our yard rather than use a screaming leaf blower, and most of us can hike or ski rather than use a motorcycle or snowmobile. Conserving quiet is more than a romantic endeavor; it is essential to the health of people and wildlife.

Science News reported on humans purposefully exposed to 15 nights of recorded traffic noise. Although the test subjects reported they were no longer bothered by the noise less than half way through the experiment and had become "used to it," measured physiological stress levels nonetheless remained at the elevated levels logged the first night.

Montana State University researchers found similar results when measuring enzyme stress levels in elk and wolves in Yellowstone and Voyageurs National Parks. During the time period snowmobile traffic increased 25%, stress enzyme levels in wolves rose 28%. Conversely, as snowmobile traffic in Voyageurs declined by 37% from 1998 to 2000, enzyme stress levels in wolves dropped the same amount, with similar results in elk.

Noise does not have to be loud enough to damage our hearing to do harm to our health and peace of mind. Time magazine reports "It takes sounds in excess of 85 decibels (db) to damage hearing, but noise less than 75 db may be linked to hypertension, and that at just 65 db leads to stress, heart damage and depression." This perhaps explains why hikers, forced to step off the trail for even the quieter 96 db motorcycles and ATVs that comply with Montana law, find them more than simply irritating.

Indeed, the Flathead National Forest looked into the inequity resulting from backcountry motorcycle use when it recently proposed banning them from several trails along the Swan Crest. It found "sound from motorcycles can carry for several miles. A non-motorized user can often hear a motorcycle coming for 10-20 minutes before the motorcycle actually reaches that user. The same noise and gas fumes can impact the non-motorized user for another 10-20 minutes as the motorcycle rider continues past . . . The sound turns into an unwelcome noise that ruins their peace and quiet and solitude, and that causes wildlife to be less visible because wildlife moves away from the noise."

Airplanes, trains, automobiles, dirt bikes, and other machinery are taking their toll on quiet places. Bernie Krause, a musician also dedicated to recording the sounds of nature around the world said in 1999, "In 1968, when I first began my odyssey, I could record for about 15 hours and capture about an hour of usable sound - a ratio of about 15 to 1. Now it takes nearly 2,000 hours to obtain one hour of untainted natural sound."

Krause tells of the aboriginal Pitjantjara of central Australia using the subtle singing of ants and other critters to navigate the flat and otherwise undifferentiated landscape.

This he contrasts to our western culture, where "the louder the sounds we can produce, the more virile we are supposed to feel absent anything else of consequence that provides us with a sense of self- or spiritual worth."

We can begin to reverse the trend in noise by being aware of our impact on others, being more secure in ourselves, and in making less selfish choices. As Time reports, "A single noisy motor scooter driving through Paris in the middle of the night can wake up as many as 200,000 people." Similarly, many of us while hiking or skiing have experienced how a single motorcycle or snowmobile can destroy the silence and solitude of a stretch of mountain range measured in miles – not to mention its disproportionate effects on wildlife.

The Flathead National Forest got it right in proposing to secure quiet habitat for both humans and wildlife by closing several trails on the Swan Crest to motorcycles: "As the primary reasons for visiting outdoor recreational environments are to escape the noise of urban areas, enjoy the natural scene, reduce tension, and obtain tranquility or solitude, sounds that are felt to interfere with these experiences will be considered annoying . . . even without registering on a sound-level meter."

There are plenty of noisy contraptions destroying peace and quiet in our increasingly populated valley bottoms. We should take care not to spread the problem into the Swan Range and other public lands. By leaving our motorcycles, ATVs, and snowmobiles behind when we recreate on our public lands, we give ourselves, others and wildlife a much needed break.

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Dirt bikes take off on a 1980's annual race through essential grizzly bear habitat in the Swan Range. The races were eliminated through public pressure and litigation. Swan View Coalition photo.