

The world is undergoing an extinction-level event. It's happening all around you right now. Stop and listen. Can you hear it? Beyond the rumble of traffic, the hum of your refrigerator, the notifications from your phone... there's a distinct lack of quiet. We've become so accustomed to the constant cacophony of daily life, we don't even notice it.

Silence is endangered, and the situation is inflicting massive harm on humankind. According to the World Health Organisation, noise pollution not only damages hearing and affects sleep, but it increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and cognitive impairment.

"We need quiet for our physical health and to connect with people and the world around us," explains Matt Mikkelsen, a sound recordist and documentary filmmaker from Ithaca, New York.

Mikkelsen was focused on a career as a drummer when, in 2012, he met Gordon Hempton, an acoustic ecologist who has spent the past four decades recording the rapidly vanishing sounds of the natural world. He instantly became an advocate for protecting nature's soundscapes and spent the next four years working on a documentary about Hempton and his work – 2017's award-winning *Being Hear*. In 2018, Hempton founded Quiet Parks International (QPI), a non-profit dedicated to identifying and preserving Earth's last remaining noiseless spaces.

Today, Mikkelsen, 28, is its Executive Director of Wilderness Quiet Parks. He and his team study the levels of human-made noise around the globe, identifying quiet places and working to protect them. Those spaces that meet the organisation's standards are presented with a QPI Award and offered assistance in areas including maintenance, park guidelines, management

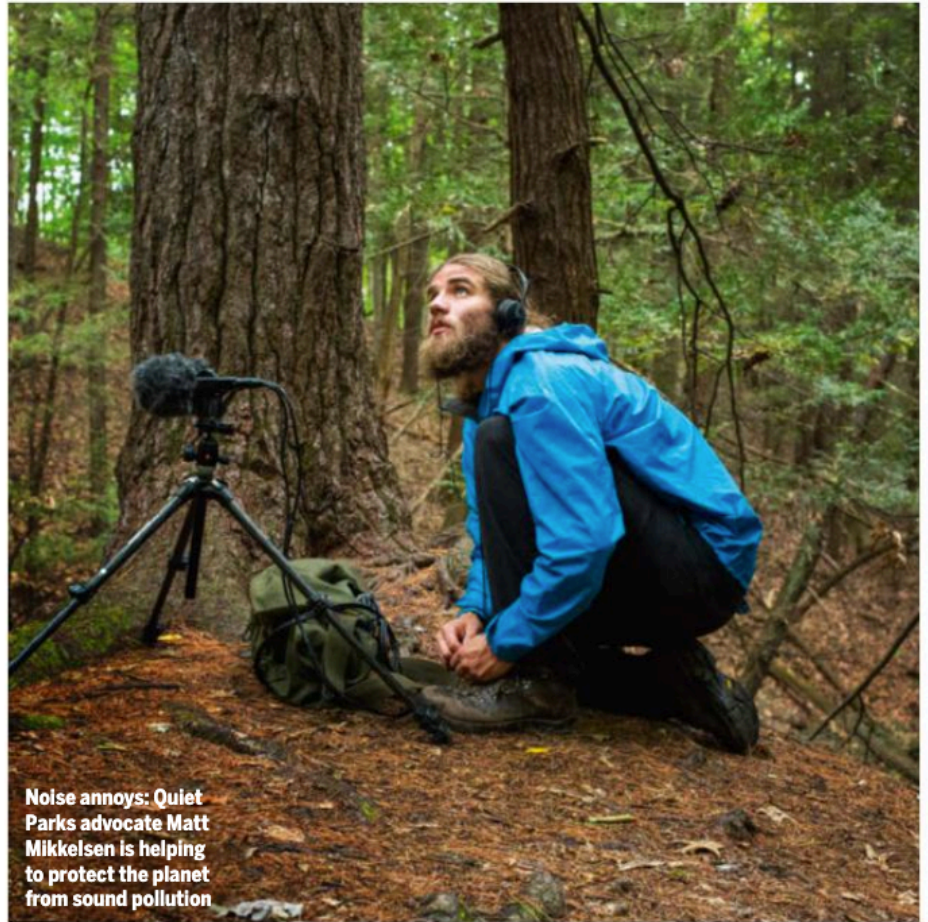
practice, and support for indigenous communities.

It's not only humans who benefit from quiet spaces, either. "Wildlife is just as busy communicating as we are," says Mikkelsen, "and noise pollution prohibits their ability to do that effectively. For example, owls hunt mainly by hearing mice 100m away. Even a small amount of noise pollution halves their feeding ground."

QPI began its work in pristine wild spaces such as the Zabalo River in Ecuador, but soon ascertained that quiet places need to be more accessible. In July this year, it named London's Hampstead Heath the first Urban Quiet Park in Europe. These spots aren't devoid of urban sounds, but birds tweeting and leaves rustling make them a haven for city dwellers. "You shouldn't have to book an expedition-level backpacking trip to be able to find quiet. Quiet brings a lot of joy. It gives space to listen, think and feel."

The non-profit plans to spread its message across the globe in 2022 with parks in Canada, Poland, Namibia, Sweden and beyond. Mikkelsen hopes the impact will be felt by all, and he believes that creating protected quiet spaces will also help tackle other problems such as ocean-plastic and air pollution.

"When you find a quiet place, it's a good indicator for the overall health of an ecosystem," he says. "By preventing noise, we're preventing all those other sources of pollution from having an impact, too." quietparks.org



Noise annoys: Quiet Parks advocate Matt Mikkelsen is helping to protect the planet from sound pollution

QUIET PARKS INTERNATIONAL

Enjoy the silence

Amid the constant chatter about environmental crises, one team of ecologists believes we should all shut up a bit – it could save the world