

Listening to Nature: Standardized Soundscapes and Imagined Ecologies, 1900–2000

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Listening to Nature: Standardized Soundscapes and Imagined Ecologies, 1900–2000, builds on the assertion that sound and listening were centrally important to the development of modern conceptions of the environment and environmentalism.

Through a series of case studies, I examine the consequences of this listening for both American and German scientists' and the public's understanding of the environment. In closely examining actual sounds and listening practices and comparing them across national contexts, I demonstrate that the sounds of global climate change have a history, as does the cultural perception of it. I focus on the intersection between early ethnomusicologists and naturalists, birders especially, as well as the role of listening in postwar management of natural resources, juxtaposing hunting traditions and bio-acoustic monitoring.

In the final case study, I explore the development of what I term “extinction listening.” I posit that listening to recordings of sounds known to be extinct or rapidly disappearing altered the way in which listeners subsequently engaged both their soundscape and the concept of extinction. These sounds included not only disappearing species but also disappearing musical traditions, both Western and non-Western, and local soundscapes. By closely examining actual sounds and listening practices, from early bird song recordings to current hunting traditions, and comparing them across national contexts, the project offers a new approach to understanding past human relationships with nature.