

Back to...

Writings

## The Local and Global "Language" of Environmental Sound

By Hildegard Westerkamp

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### Abstract

Environmental sound can be understood as a type of language. Each sound or soundscape has its own meanings and expressions and is like a spoken word: it has something to say about all living beings' behaviours and their relationship to their surroundings, about listening and soundmaking habits. Whether urban or rural, the sounds of our home environments give us - often unconsciously - a strong "sense of place". Since audio technology and recording equipment can now be used in similarly portable ways as a camera, the soundscape can be recorded, reproduced, composed and processed by more people than ever before. All sounds of the world can be heard on radio, TV, CD, and the internet. All sounds can become part of a broadcast, a soundscape composition or a film soundtrack.

What happens to our sense of place in the face of this form of globalization? How can we preserve it and at the same time take the opportunity to deepen our understanding of other places and cultures of the globe? An attempt will be made here to explore how listening to and composing with environmental sound can serve as a bridge between the local and the global.

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Performance of *Camelvoice* for tape and live spoken voice.  
(See Appendix for complete transcription)

Silence

That was *Camelvoice*, the beginning of a larger piece, entitled "From the India Sound Journal", and slightly adapted to this context here in Peterborough. The piece as a whole is attempting to process the many astonishing and surprising experiences I have had in a culture that was very foreign to me when I first encountered it.

Pause

I want to highlight three points today all of which connect in some way to *Camelvoice* and are imbedded in my topic about *The Global and Local "Language" of Environmental Sound*.

The first one addresses the widespread attraction these days towards recording and composing with environmental sound and how the relatively affordable and portable audio technology has encouraged this trend. Connected to this growing interest is an often indiscriminate and uninformed use of the words soundscape and acoustic ecology. In other words, there seems to be a belief

that if one works with environmental sounds one is automatically a soundscape artist and an acoustic ecologist.

The second point addresses the question of place. An incredible number of human beings are on the move across the globe nowadays, whether they are travellers and emigrants who go to new places by choice or refugees who are forced to leave their countries and settle on foreign territory. The resulting figures of displaced people are high. Questions of place and where we belong tend to accompany many of us who are on the move, as a way to orient ourselves in a world where "change itself has become the most pervasive and dependable part of life." (Suzuki, 1997, p. 172)

The third point has to do with ecology. Whenever we address issues about place, about the local in relation to the globe as a whole, questions inevitably emerge about how we can possibly find a relationship that is ecologically balanced. Two Canadian books that promised to give some insight into these questions and could perhaps help to connect to the topic of environmental sound, listening and acoustic ecology became my conversation partners while preparing this presentation. They were David Suzuki's and Amanda McConnell's *The Sacred Balance-Rediscovering Our Place in Nature*, written in 1997 and Grant Copeland's *Acts of Balance-Profits, People and Place*, written in 1999. I will be quoting quite extensively from both of these books.

Finding a balance between the local and the global is becoming exceedingly urgent when we consider that

**...the rapid globalization of the world economy benefits transnational corporations at the expense of community-based economies, especially in developing countries.**  
(Copeland 1999, p. 6).

In order for specific characteristics of a place and thereby a sense of place to survive in the face of sweeping corporate homogenization, it has become a matter of survival to preserve, highlight or recreate local, regional identities. But this is a complex task when this same corporate world has also established a transportation and communication net that aims to seduce us into escaping the constraints of home and of the familiar, promises paradise in distant parts of the world, or connects us instantaneously with people all over the globe. Many ecologists have recognized that any environmental issue is nowadays primarily an economic issue (Copeland, 1999): in order to withstand global corporations and their destructive approach to the environment, workable local economies have to be created and supported. Ironically, community groups, environmental groups and NGO's have discovered that email and the internet are important and subversive tools of communication among communities across the world for information exchange of how best to work locally in the face of corporate globalization.

Given this current scenario, how can listening, recording and composing with environmental sound play a role in finding a balance between the local and the global? Can we claim that we are engaged in an ecological act when exploring the soundscape in such a fashion? *Camelvoice*, is probably pointing mostly at the inherent contradictions that we face when we work with environmental sound. Suzuki says that

**Today we can see the beginnings of a new way of thinking about the world-as sets of relationships rather than separated objects - which we call ecology....  
We belong to, are made of, that world that surrounds us, and we respond to it in ways beyond knowing.**  
(Suzuki, 1997, pp. 198-99)

But as soon as we record any sound it inevitably becomes an *object* out of context and, when played back, it does not belong to the place that surrounds

the listener. Doesn't that imply that the act of recording any environmental sound and the act of listening to such recordings is in direct contradiction to the central meanings of ecology? Strictly speaking the answer must be yes, as the *original* relationships between ear, sound and environment no longer exist.

A Canadian composer was recently quoted as saying

**I see myself as an acoustical ecologist. For instance, certain sounds are disappearing-horses' hooves clopping and the clink of glass milk bottles. It occurred to me that, as nature becomes more eroded by urban expansion, many streams will dry up. Once you record the sounds of the streams, you've got a sample of something ecological.**  
(Michael Coghlan in Focus on Research, York University, Toronto, Winter 2000, p.4)

Assuming that he was quoted correctly, I must disagree with this composer wholeheartedly. A sound sample in itself-even if it is preserving a disappearing sound-cannot be something ecological. In fact, to say it this way, is a contradiction in terms. A sample, by definition, is taken out of its context and thereby loses all relationship to its former place and time and its original environmental, social, cultural and political meanings.

To give this composer the benefit of the doubt, his quote may have fallen victim to the same process of sampling that he seems to use in composing with environmental sound. But if he was truly interested in supporting issues of acoustic ecology, he would not only record the sound of a dried-up creek and archive it or use it in his compositions. He would aim to preserve the stream itself and his recording of the watersounds could be a tool in reaching this aim.

It is at this juncture when it becomes interesting and hopefully ecologically effective to work with the sounds of the environment. It does not really matter whether we use our ears in listening walks, or present recorded soundscapes or environmental compositions to better understand the significance and the meanings of sound in our lives. All these actions are based on listening and making our relationship to place a conscious one. In fact, it may be our *responsibility* to get to know the tools of sound communication technology if we want to work effectively as acoustic ecologists. They can be utilized to counteract the dominating corporate/commercial "tone" in the media by creating alternative expressions.

In *Camelvoice*, the camel's sounds have not only been taken out of its desert context, I also have extracted very specific sounds from a much longer recording. Plus, I am replaying them in this environment which is diametrically opposed to that of the desert. We cannot smell the camel, we do not see it, we cannot touch it. There cannot be a true living exchange between us and the recorded animal. I don't actually need to tell you this, as the piece itself points out exactly that and was created precisely for that reason: to speak of the many contradictions and to ask what in fact we are carrying home with us, when we have made such a recording. My strongest memory of that experience is that I heard everything, including the desert silence, amplified through my headphones and that I have no idea what the place sounded like without that mediation. The fact that this camel's task was to carry foreign visitors on a desert ride, placed it squarely at the crossroads between global and local economies: that is, by carrying its load, the tourist, it participates in the economic exchanges of the global tourist industry and in that act becomes the vehicle for the people in this desert village Sam, Rajasthan, to earn a living and strengthen the local economy. And it is the *recording*, not the live experience-that caused me to create *Camelvoice* and question the camel's place and situation.

Grant Copeland states that

**No more than five corporations now control more than 50 per cent of the global markets for consumer durables, automotive products, airlines, aerospace, electronic components, electricity and electronics, and steel.**

(Copeland, 1999, p. 6)

By flying with the airlines, using the electricity in hotels, renting taxis, bringing our electronics such as cameras, videos and sound recording equipment, we are participating in and are totally dependent on the workings of the global economy, in order to have this unique desert experience. And the camel's body is the pivotal point in this specific meeting of global and local economies—a formidable burden to carry for any living being. At the moment of the recording in 1992, this camel with all its quirky personality traits still belonged to a family group in this village. A growing tourist industry could eventually ruin this relationship by making the monetary exchange more important than the actual experience between people, camel and environment. We have already seen this happen to horses all over the world who are trained into docile lifeless creatures for the comfort and safety of the paying tourist.

At the beginning of this talk most of you had never heard of this camel, now you know its voice and you have also heard the story of our meeting, our limited relationship. Although we know that the story cannot replace the live situation, perhaps it can be the beginning of a conversation that we need to have with and about living beings in our world. Suzuki quotes ecologist Joseph Meeker as saying,

**Learning to converse well with the world can begin by listening carefully to the messages sent ceaselessly by our bodies and by the other forms of life that share this planet. The best conversations are still those that play on the variations on that great and ancient theme, "I'm here; Where are you?"**

(Suzuki, 1997, p. 197)

In some way *Camelvoice* is such a conversation, although when I made the piece, I never thought of it in that way. Suzuki claims that

**The evolutionary context of human history makes it plausible that the human genome - the DNA blueprint that makes us what we are - has over time acquired a genetically programmed need to be in the company of other species.**

**Edward O. Wilson has coined the term "biophilia" (based on the Greek words for "life" and "love") for this need. He defines biophilia as "the innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes." It leads to an "emotional affiliation of human beings to other living beings..."**

**Multiple strands of emotional response are woven into symbols composing a large part of culture."**

**In urban environments, our genetically programmed need to be with other species is usually thwarted, leaving us yearning.**

(Suzuki, 1997, p. 177)

*Camelvoice* is part of a larger compositional project that has allowed me to find access and to create an "emotional affiliation" to a culture that would have continued to feel very foreign without this. And I can only hope that the combination of my speaking about it and playing you the piece is a meaningful continuation for you as well, of that same conversation with the world.

Computers, sound software, recording equipment are made by some of the largest, most powerful corporations. So, if we choose to use audio technology for our soundscape work, we are automatically partaking in the global market economy. But rather than making commercials for a large corporation about

camel rides in the desert, we can choose to put ourselves in the same spot as the camel: into that pivotal point between the global and the local. We can use these tools to reveal the details and specific characteristics of a place and to celebrate its uniqueness. For, the more deeply a place or a culture understands and honors its own unique character, the harder it is for a corporation to eliminate a local sense of place. We can choose to do with the language of sound what the corporate world does or what the subversive poet does with the language of words. Suzuki states that

**Language weaves worlds of being and meaning; but this is a double-edged sword. ....The propaganda of destructive forest practices informs us that "the clearcut is a temporary meadow." Definition identifies, specifies and limits a thing, describes what it is and what it is not: it is the tool of our great classifying brain. Poetry, in contrast, is the tool of synthesis, of narrative. It struggles with boundaries in an effort to mean more, include more, to find the universal in the particular. It is the dance of words, creating more-than-meaning, reattaching the name, the thing, to everything around it.**  
(Suzuki, 1997, pp. 201-202)

Using recorded environmental sound as a type of language in ones compositions can also be a double-edged sword. Rather than using the soundscape as a large resource of sound samples for abstract musical ideas, a sound piece can be a vehicle for deeper understanding of acoustic environmental issues and issues of perception, a vehicle for creating "more-than-meaning". Such work is not an end product but, ideally, a beginning from which to create new relationships to place and time for both composer and listener.

Because the natural environment itself is threatened by corporate invasion, and because urbanization has alienated many of us from nature, there is substantial reason why we would want to highlight and amplify nature's sonic language, its plight, its endangered position. Suzuki claims that

**A human-engineered habitat of asphalt, concrete and glass reinforces our belief that we live outside of and above nature, immune to uncertainty and the unexpected of the wild.**  
(Suzuki, 1997, p. 180)

Certainly, the sound of traffic, air-conditioning, background and foreground music, construction, gardening equipment, the electrical hums, among many others are the acoustic expression of this disconnection from the natural world. They are soundwalls that prevent us from hearing distance, space and the more subtle sounds of acoustic exchange among humans and other living beings. Everything that ties us to the global market makes itself heard in broadband hums. This includes, ironically, the hum of computer hard drives in studios where environmental sound works are created. I am also convinced that many of the papers for this international conference on acoustic ecology were written to the accompaniment of this all pervasive hum. But because we can block out what we do not want to hear while thinking and writing, even people like us, who supposedly are aware of their surrounding soundscapes often choose not to notice. Were we to record these humming soundscapes and play them back here, we would all be appalled by what we hear.

This leads me to conclude that, despite the fact that we have gathered here out of an honest concern for the quality of the soundscape and to speak about acoustic ecology, we have not resolved the contradictions between our actual soundscapes and what we talk, write and compose about. The fact is that any continuous broadband sound separates us from the world around us. And this, in the long-run can only impoverish our relationship to the natural world, and to the people around us. Suzuki says

**When we forget that we are embedded in the natural world,  
we also forget that what we do to our surroundings we are doing to  
ourselves.  
.....Ecopsychologists argue that the damage we do to ourselves and our  
surroundings  
is caused by our separation from nature. Instead of trying to adjust to the  
existing  
social order and accept the status quo, they argue that for true mental  
health we must  
challenge the norm and take into account the interrelatedness of people and  
all other life forms.  
(Suzuki, 1997, p. 179)**

Challenging today's status quo literally means silencing, turning off, reducing the hums that are symbolic for corporate global thinking and that, like a cancerous growth, destroy the local, subtle elements of place and culture, destroy precisely that which gives a place its specific character and thus its vitality and energy. It also requires that we continuously strengthen our own listening attention, whether we are listening with our bare ears or through audio technology. And this in turn, of course strengthens our relationship to and understanding of the soundscape as a whole. Creating soundscape pieces from that position of understanding, enables us to speak the language of environmental sound with real care for the ecological balance of the soundscape. As Suzuki's says

**If we can see (as we once saw very well) that our conversation  
with the planet is reciprocal and mutually creative, then we cannot help  
walk carefully  
in that field of meaning.  
(Suzuki, 1997, p. 206)**

But of course, with soundscape recordings and compositions we can only create repeatable excerpts from our sound environment for such a conversation, no matter how sensitively they have been put together. Perhaps the ultimate ecological step is to let go of our incessant drive to reproduce sound, to shape it, to broadcast it into the world. Similarly to what Pablo Neruda suggests in this excerpt of his poem *Keeping Quiet*(original title *A Callarse*):

**If we were not so single-minded  
about keeping our lives moving,  
and for once could do nothing,  
perhaps a huge silence  
might interrupt this sadness  
of never understanding ourselves  
and of threatening ourselves with death.  
Perhaps the earth can teach us  
as when everything seems dead  
and later proves to be alive**

We may simply want to stop and listen. After some time we may begin to hear the truly local, the here-and-now, and after some more time we may hear the inner world tone that, according to Sikh wisdom, underlies everything and connects us through our consciousness both to the here and now and to the globe as a whole. Because, this may be the only thing left, should the global economy collapse and the electricity shut off.

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### **References:**

Copeland, Grant. 1999. *Acts of Balance & Profits, People and Place*, New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, Canada 1999.

## Appendix

### Transcription of Camelvoice

<u>TAPE</u>	<u>TEXT</u>
(camel sounds)	(live spoken voice)
1) snort	At this moment it's November 28, 1992-- I'm riding on a camel --
2) snort	- a camel in the desert near Jaisalmer, in Rajasthan, India.
3) /\	Actually at this moment it is July 1st, 2000.
4) quiet grunt	I'm riding through the electroacoustic ether,
5) bah!	together with my camel,
6) bah! oh!	at "SoundEscape" in Peterborough, Ontario.
7).. "back"	This is a talk about the Local and
8) ooh	Global "Language" of Environmental Sound.
9) long gurgle "oh dear"	My name is Hildegard Westerkamp and this is an excerpt from the India Sound Journal".
10) picture"	Everyone knows where I am.
11) long gurgle "that's nice"	Everyone can see me, I mean the real me, body and all.
12) ah	But noone can see the camel. It's all voice.
13) oh oh	Camelvoice in Rajasthan
14) gurgle	Audience and I in Peterborough. All bony and voice. We do not see the camel. The camel doesn't see us. Camelvoice disembodied.
15) chewing	Sometimes I do show a slide of me recording the camel. Me laughing the camel smirking. In Rajasthan. --But not today.
16) long gurgle	Camelvoice November 1992.
17) burp	Here in Peterborough, July 1st, 2000 at Sound Escape. Riding through the electroacoustic ether disembodied from the sand, the heat, it's voice.
18) chewing "he'll eat it"	Where is the camel at this moment? Where is it eating? Who is riding it? Recording it's voice? Photographing its body?
19) one chew	Where is it now? Reproduced many times all over this uhm... Global Village?
20) lips flapping	Is it still the same camel, chewing and digesting loudly in the village of Sam, Rajasthan?
21)"posing"	

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[Top of page](#)