

Noise Pollution Awareness – The Time for Activism is Now!

by Barbara Hichens

Shortly after the terrible events of 11 September 2001, my New Jersey neighbors decided to play their version of extreme wrestling in their backyard. They began each occasion by reciting the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance, after which the game began by bashing each other over the head with fluorescent light bulbs and screaming at the top of their lungs. When neighborhood residents called the police to complain about the noise, the police came and informed the residents that their neighbors had the right to play in their backyard. The underlying message, of course, was that the other neighbors had no rights when it came to being able to live in peace and quiet.

In 2004, my husband and I relocated to Pennsylvania, buying a home on a country road in a picturesque village that has small farm holdings where neighbors keep goats, sheep, cows, and horses. We had a view of a nine-acre field across the road and a five-acre field behind our property. Such a peaceful change from our New Jersey neighborhood.

The following year, one of our neighbors sold 13 parcels of land. The field across the road now contains three new homes, with an additional three further down, and this year a new home is to be built on the property behind ours.

The noise produced by the construction workers during the building of each of these new homes included heavy machinery, hammering, and yelling – all day long. To add insult to injury, the workers had a radio blasting to entertain themselves.

A young couple moved into one of those new houses and brought with them three all-terrain vehicles. I enjoy gardening but as soon as playtime begins on the ATVs, I put my gardening tools away and retreat inside, where the noise is only slightly abated. Another neighbor has a street rod, an ATV, and several bobbers (motorcycles), and enjoys having outdoor parties with loud music. One night this past winter I was awakened at midnight and kept awake for an hour and a half by someone on a snowmobile in the park located behind the houses across the road. So much for the rural life.

The point is, as population grows, so grows the noise. So what can we do? Here are some suggestions.

Convert your lawn to a native meadow to reduce or eliminate the need for outdoor power equipment, such as lawn mowers, weed trimmers, wood chippers, chainsaws, and leaf blowers. We are conditioned to have beautifully manicured lawns, yet grass is a poor habitat for wildlife, since they require native plants for their survival. Native meadows reduce the pollutions of noise, exhaust fumes, and chemicals, and have many other benefits, including less expense, time, labor, and water. Perhaps when your neighbors see all the benefits, they will follow suit.

Respect our wildlife, farm animals, and pets. A few years ago, my husband and I attended the local 4-H Fair. The music was so loud, I almost had a panic attack, thinking about the animals who had no way to escape from the noise. We left early and afterwards, I wrote to the local Cooperative Extension Service to express my concerns. Their response was no response. Another form of entertainment to think twice about is fireworks, which can be very scary to wildlife and pets.

Speak up. The next time you are at a store, restaurant, or event that has loud music, ask to have it lowered. If you are uncomfortable speaking to someone, contact the place by email to convey your concern. The more that people communicate their dislike of loud music, the better chance that people will take the issue seriously.

Engage people. I dislike music or television in waiting rooms; I come prepared to wait with a book to read. I have found that I get no objection when I ask other waiting patients or customers if they would mind if I lowered the volume on the television, and it often results in the start of a friendly conversation.

Ask the schools in your community to make noise education part of the curriculum. The idea that one group of people has the right to live their life to the detriment of another group of people is unacceptable and must change, and the way to do that is through education.

Ask the United Nations to create a World Right to Quiet Day – to celebrate the health and environmental benefits of quiet and to raise awareness of the problems related to noise, including stress-related illnesses, high blood pressure, speech interference, hearing loss, sleep disruption, and lost productivity.

Don't keep quiet about noise pollution!