

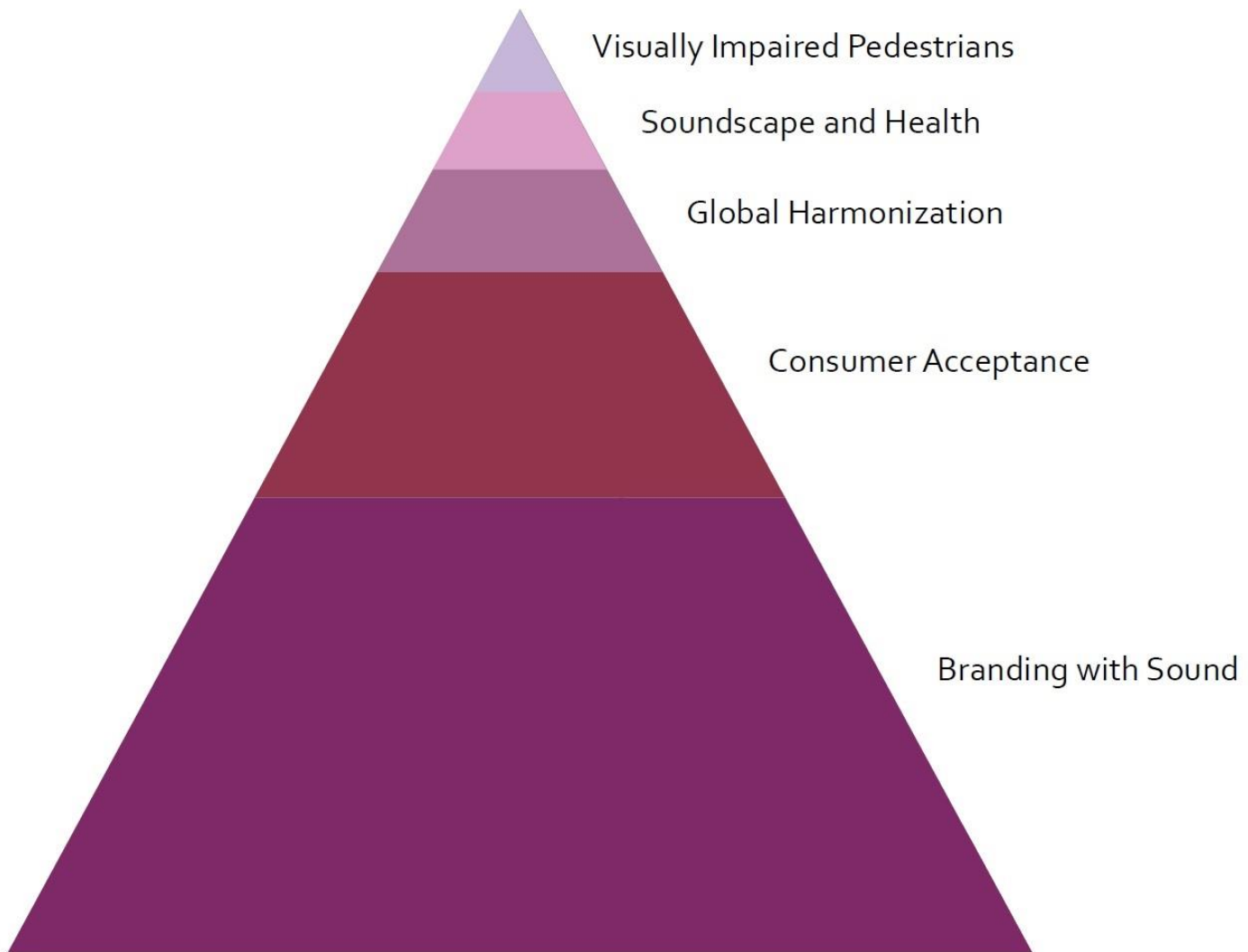
NOISE LETTER

The Newsletter of the Right to Quiet Society
for Soundscape Awareness and Protection

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Charitable Registration BN: 11915 4680 RR 0001

Spring 2021

AVAS and the Pyramid of Automotive Concerns



Will pedestrian warning sounds be discernible?

by Jeanine Botta

"Being bothered by disgruntled blind people was the last thing car companies wanted as they created the next generation of vehicles," Deborah Kent Stein wrote. In the article "Belling the Cat," Stein describes the inception of the long endeavor to make quiet cars safer, which culminated in the passage of the US Pedestrian Safety Enhancement Act of 2010 (PSEA).

When the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) began the task of making quiet vehicles safer, its leaders were conflicted about their belief that blind people could "live in the world as they found it" rather than ask for adaptations to meet their needs. Instead, they relied on information found in the existing environment – like the sound of an approaching car – to help them travel safely. But it was clear that something needed to be done. Blind pedestrians were at risk crossing streets when the approach of electric and hybrid electric cars could not be heard. NFB led efforts to convince automakers to add sound to quiet cars being driven at low speeds, and at first automakers and trade associations were uninterested and difficult to engage with.

As it turned out, blind and visually impaired people weren't the only ones who stood to benefit from acoustic vehicle alerting systems (AVAS), also referred to as pedestrian warning sounds (PSW). NFB had begun to hear from sighted pedestrians and cyclists who'd had frightening "near misses" as well.

In the years that followed the passage of the PSEA, stakeholders debated minimum sound requirements, standards, and what a warning should sound like. On September 17, 2019 the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) issued a call for public comments in the Federal Register. Auto industry trade associations wanted customers to be able to select from a variety of sounds – and automakers wanted to be able to use AVAS sounds for branding purposes.

In its public comment, the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) wrote: "Uniformity in the sound that electric cars emit is imperative. The different environments that cars travel through can be heavily riddled with a myriad of other sounds. This symphony of sounds can be difficult to sort through. As a result, a distinguishable and uniform sound is necessary to assist the blind community in identifying hybrid or electric cars. If vehicle owners could select from a variety of sounds, the multitude of sounds may confuse blind pedestrians. A more uniform set of sounds will enable blind travelers to more easily figure out when a hybrid or electric car is in their vicinity."

By contrast, NFB had no objection to selectable sounds as long as they met minimum sound requirements, stating "We do not believe it is necessary to place a restriction on the number of driver-selectable sounds."

The comment period closed on November 1, 2019 with 54 comments, and the final rule is scheduled for 2022.

Currently some automakers use a range of external sounds that lack uniformity and seem unrelated to pedestrian safety. For several years the Chevy Volt used horn sounds as its PWS. More recently, Tesla released a software update providing a suite of sounds its cars can emit continuously while in drive, or by using the horn when the car is in park. The Boombox app update gives Tesla drivers the ability to emit offensive sounds by using the horn when the car is in park (such as at a red light) to mock pedestrians (a pastime captured in YouTube videos). They can also select continuous sounds that are humorous and do not seem discernible as the approach of a car.

If selectable AVAS sounds are approved, and if they are not sufficiently uniform, it is possible that intended beneficiaries won't discern approaching cars. If standards are finally set but individual automakers don't follow the guidance set forth, the soundscape of residential streets, village roads, and parking lots will be filled with sonic litter. The reason for the sound will no longer be relevant. If pedestrian warning sounds are not easily identifiable (without having to think or wonder) then a decade's worth of work will have been wasted. Let's not forget that the goal of the Pedestrian Safety Enhancement Act was exquisitely simple.

Illustration: Alex Dewar Design

Resources

Stein, DK (2011) Belling the Cat: The Long Road to the Passage of the Pedestrian Safety Enhancement Act. Braille Monitor, 54:6 <https://nfb.org/sites/nfb.org/files/images/nfb/publications/bm/bm11/bm1106/bm110602.htm> (Article) https://nfb.org/sites/nfb.org/files/images/nfb/audio/braille_monitor/2011/june/06_belling_the_cat.mp3 (MP3)

Fiebig, A. (Winter 2020) Electric Vehicles Get Alert Signals to be Heard by Pedestrians: Benefits and Drawbacks. Acoustics Today. <https://acousticstoday.org/issues/2020AT/Winter2020/index.html>

Sandberg, U., Goubert, L., and Mioduszewski, P. (August 2010). Are vehicles driven in electric mode so quiet that they need acoustic warning signals. 20th International Congress on Acoustics. https://www.acoustics.asn.au/conference_proceedings/ICA2010/cdr-ICA2010/papers/p997.pdf

Levin, T. (January 2021) Tesla owners can now change the car's horn to sound like anything they want. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/videos-show-teslas-noisy-new-boombox-feature-in-action-2021-1>

I Changed My Tesla Engine Sound To The Bruh Sound Effect (December 2020) Fawcette. <https://youtu.be/cQTBFAgNGR0>

Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard No. 141, Minimum Sound Requirements for Hybrid and Electric Vehicles [shorturl.at/iceHY](https://www.nhtsa.gov/rulemaking/regulations/141) Public comments [shorturl.at/ntyPX](https://www.nhtsa.gov/rulemaking/regulations/141)

Peaceful paradise lost – due to freighter noise



Photo: Laurie MacBride, EyeOnEnvironment.com

Right to Quiet recently learned of a developing problem in the waters surrounding British Columbia's Gulf Islands. Freighters destined for the Port of Vancouver have been anchoring at 30 designated sites around the Gulf Islands due to an alleged lack of spaces in Vancouver. Noise is impacting residents, and the freighters have negative impacts on the environment and marine life. Canadian marine regulations apparently leave the ships free of oversight while anchored at these sites, although three federal government ministries share jurisdiction over them. Local citizens and some First Nations are trying to obtain government help, so far to no avail; Right to Quiet has joined their efforts. Island resident Aaron Kipnis sent us this perspective, which first appeared in the January 27 *Gulf Islands Driftwood*.

We all hear planes overhead, chainsaws in the woods, leaf blowers in the yard and construction noise at times. These normal sounds of contemporary life might be annoying if we are having a quiet moment, listening to the birds or trying to take a nap. But then it stops. Nights are quieter. Someone's music at a party is loud, but then it stops. We may hear a freighter pass in the channel, but then it stops. This is life. But freighters at anchorage off shore make noise all night and all day. It does not stop.

Diesel generators reverberating through cavernous steel hulls generate grating, incessant noise for days, weeks, even a month before they move on and then . . . the next ship arrives. Some crews do loud maintenance late at night. Ships frequently drop anchor well past midnight with thunderous cacophony of huge anchor chains disrupting sleep. Some people may think increasing industrial noise in coastal residential areas is just inevitable change we have to learn to live with. However, these loud engines running 24/7 can have dramatic impacts on human and animal health.

Numerous studies document negative effects of human-generated noise on dolphins, crabs, oysters, and whales, to name a few. Stressed invertebrates clamp their shells shut and feed less while whales must make louder vocalizations to communicate and can become disoriented. Sea and shore birds can also be affected. Traumatic freighter-generated noise echoes through the entire ecosystem. As for us humans on shore, the unremitting, throbbing growl of anchored freighters,

combined with the sleep disruptions they cause can raise blood pressure, cortisol, and glucose. Sustained low frequency noise can even cause heart irregularities and higher incidence of stroke. Moreover, people who live near freeways experience more depression and anxiety than residents in quieter neighborhoods. This is evidenced, in part, by increased prescriptions for mental disorders in noisier areas. Living adjacent to continuously present freighters is sonically comparable to living near a freeway - our quiet, peaceful paradise lost.

Not everyone is sensitive to unceasing noise, but those of us who live near shore are suffering along with marine animals from the growing numbers of freighters anchoring in the Gulf Islands. Practices in other nations demonstrate that growing ports don't need longer lineups with ships at anchor if they work efficiently. The Port of Vancouver could incorporate an early arrival system to keep these international ships, whose noise levels are unregulated, in port where they belong. These ships foul our water, air, and view-sheds while destroying seabed habitats with anchor chains. An oil spill seems inevitable. But these are topics for another time.

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For more information see <https://protect-the-islands-sea.org>

Aaron Kipnis, Ph.D. is a professor emeritus of clinical psychology, author, and psychotherapist in private practice on Salt Spring Island.

New Board Members at Large

Right to Quiet's administrative transformation continues with the growth of its Board of Directors. Our two new directors at large are Elvira Lount and Arline Bronzaft, PhD. Both have had close ties to Hans Schmid and Right to Quiet for many years, and both have roots in Toronto. Right to Quiet is indeed honoured to have these two dynamic ladies contributing their ideas and perspectives as we further develop our mission.

Elvira Lount

As a young woman, Elvira Lount hitchhiked from Toronto to Vancouver, which became her home, although she spent years traveling through Europe and living in London. Producer of more than fifty video and film documentaries and a dramatic feature film, Elvira is a nature photographer, a social and environmental activist, and a partner in Utopia Pictures.

Active in politics all her adult life, Elvira has long worked on projects that aim to preserve the integrity of natural spaces, and recently founded [Keep Kits Beach Wild](#). Right to Quiet was honored to premiere her film [The COVID Effect on Outdoor Noise](#) at our Annual General Meeting on November 21, 2020.

Elvira has an active [petition](#) urging the Vancouver Park Board not to go through with legislation that will designate a protected natural area, a wildlife roaming ground in Vanier Park, as a "bring your own bottle" public drinking zone. The petition encourages signers to also send letters and emails directly to Park Board leadership.



Arline Bronzaft

Arline Bronzaft was born in New York City to a Canadian mother. While teaching psychology at Herbert H. Lehman College, she was approached by a student whose child attended an elementary school affected by the noise of nearby elevated train tracks. Arline's effort to reduce that noise led to her landmark studies on the effects of noise on children's reading levels. Arline has written extensively on the effects of noise on health as well as political and regulatory aspects of addressing noise.

Arline regularly blogs for The Quiet Coalition, and she has been a featured guest in memorable podcasts about noise. She has worked with five New York City mayors, and serves on the board of GrowNYC, an environmental organization whose noise [program](#) offers solutions to New York City constituents.

A superb storyteller, Arline is frequently invited to academic and political events. As a guest on podcasts, she has a chance to disseminate information about the benefits of a healthy sound environment to children's learning. On Randi Zuckerberg's Powered by Audio [podcast](#), Arline discusses positive effects across the lifespan for people who grew up in quieter homes. And during a Soundproofist [podcast](#), Arline's grandson Matt unexpectedly joined the conversation, offering a perspective on what it's like to grow up under an airport's flight path.



Honouring Our Past President

Retired President Hans Schmid had an enormous impact on Right to Quiet's first forty years. Hans's achievements were recognized by MP Joyce Murray's Hidden Heroes award, which was featured in the Summer 2019 *NOISE* Letter, accessible [here](#). This lovely photo from that event on June 22, 2019 was kindly made available by the Office of The Honourable Joyce Murray, P.C., M.P. for Vancouver Quadra.

With his characteristic modesty, Hans still appreciates the great help and support of members and friends of quiet who enabled Right to Quiet Society for Soundscape Awareness and Protection to "pull through" doing its important work for 39 years, 31 of which he was actively involved.



Ilse Schnirch (1936 – 2021)

April 2021 brought the passing of Ilse Schnirch. Many longtime members of Right to Quiet will remember Ilse not only as the devoted companion of Honorary President Hans Schmid, but also as a dependable supporter and board member. Born in Vienna, Ilse emigrated to Guelph (Ontario) as a laboratory technician, and later to Vancouver. A mutual interest in travel and photography led to their meeting in 1974 on Haida Gwaii (then called Queen Charlotte Islands). After Hans became afflicted with paraplegia in 1984, Ilse's assistance was indispensable. For the April 28 virtual memorial service he wrote "...it was Ilse's unwavering help that allowed me to do what I could no longer have done alone as a paraplegic.

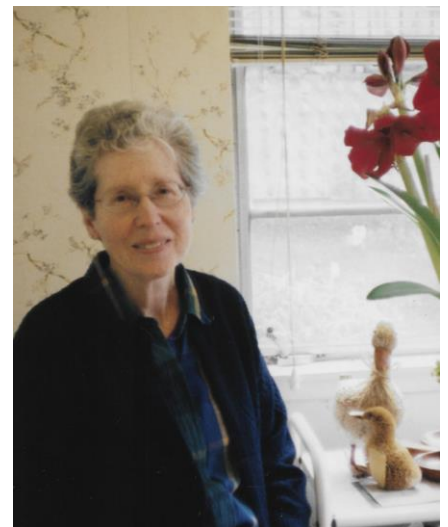


Her 2018 Alzheimer's diagnosis was complicated by a recent hip fracture. "She had played her role to the end and left the stage ...the jolly, generous person she always was." Right to Quiet has lost an invaluable supporter and a dear friend.

Ann Shelton Foster (1938 – 2019)

Personal relationships sometimes bring unexpected rewards. Decades ago, Hans Schmid's life partner Ilse Schnirch befriended a fellow amateur musician at a west coast music camp, and Ann Foster subsequently met Hans, joined the Right to Quiet Society, and made regular, generous donations. Over the years they shared mutual interests. Ann also spoke German. Right to Quiet members know that Hans and Ilse both emigrated from Austria.

In July 2019 we were notified that we were one of numerous local environmental, cultural, and social justice nonprofits, which would share a bequest from the Estate of Ann Shelton Foster; in January 2021 Right to Quiet received that share, a \$14,000 cheque. We are deeply grateful for Ann's generosity, which is facilitating our reconstruction of the website, development of a new soundscape awareness campaign, and more.



Right to Quiet Position Statement

Amplified Music in Vancouver Parks

During this stressful time and lacking indoor recreational opportunities, many citizens of Vancouver have sought the sanctuary of peace and quiet in our parks.

Unfortunately, the parks have become a battleground between those seeking quiet relaxation to destress in a natural environment and street entertainers who are using parks as a commercial opportunity for operating sound amplification systems, illegally.

(Park Board By-Law 8 (c) No person shall operate any amplifying system or loud speaker in any park without the written permission of the General Manager first had and obtained.)

The offenders have taken over English Bay and Kitsilano beaches since being excluded from their usual pre-pandemic street venues. This is particularly troubling on Sunset Beach, one of only three City of Vancouver designated quiet parks.

(Park Board By-Law 22(L): No person shall ... in any portion of a park designated as a "quiet area" and posted as such, operate a radio, tape player, or other device capable of transmitting live or recorded sound, unless the sound is transmitted directly to a person's ears through the use of headphones.)

Confrontations between aggrieved citizens and performers are common, but enforcement is rare. In the second year of fielding calls for help from exasperated West End and Kitsilano residents, Right to Quiet feels obliged to demand action by the City of Vancouver to restore peace and order to its outdoor sanctuaries called parks:

1. Replace misleading/falsely worded website information with clarity about amplification, busking, and designated quiet parks;
2. Post proper signage in parks;
3. Begin enforcement of existing regulations immediately to restore public confidence;
4. Reopen the "[Busking in Vancouver streets](#)" program suspended during Covid-19, allowing street performers to return to pre-pandemic venues and get out of the parks.

Long ignored and frustrated, some residents have begun exploring other remedies such as private signage, legal action, the BC Ombudsperson, demonstrations, and a dedicated website.

We call upon the City Council, Park Board and the VPD to set aside their respective bureaucratic obstacles preventing soundscape protection in our cherished parks. Procrastination is no longer an option.

