

## Saanich park volunteers seek the sound of silence



By Victoria News

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At certain locations in Mount Doug park, the silence of the forest is broken only by a chirping bird or the rustle of the wind. Or an airplane.

"That doesn't count," said Ian Harper, as a single engine plane drones overhead the Douglas fir canopy. Even in the most peaceful parts of the park, it's hard to escape sounds of the city.

But it's those extremely quiet places, and everywhere in-between, that the Friends of Mount Douglas Park Society plan to map out as a soundscape.

Given enough volunteers willing to lend their ears and best judgement on assessing sound levels in the park, society president Darrell Wick and Harper, a recent University of Victoria urban development graduate, plan to create a colour-coded trail map that indicates typical sound levels due to city noise, and specific places where quiet tranquility is almost guaranteed.

Of course, most people don't need a map to tell them that deep in the woods near Little Mount Doug, for instance, is far quieter than walking on the trail next to Mount Douglas Parkway at rush hour.

But the varying geography of the park can channel traffic noise deep into the forest or almost block it completely, even on trails relatively close the road. An earth berm on Norn trail muffled 3 p.m. parkway traffic, leaving only bird twitters (and the airplane flyover). It was a different story 50 metres away where the ground slope carried car noise to the trail.

"Most people don't think about natural sounds and silence. A lot of people in the park wear iPods to block the street sounds," Wick said. "That got us going. We want to document and overall soundscape for the park – where do you hear only nature, or hear only cars?"

Wick's idea for a sound map but was triggered when a new and apparently noisy air conditioning unit was installed for existing transmitter equipment at the top of the mountain. Saanich managed to throttle back the racket, but it got Wick thinking about how urban sounds impact the park.

He took inspiration from organizations like onesquareinch.org, which has designed a specific "one square inch" location within Olympic National Park in Washington State as the quietest place in the U.S.

"It got us thinking we need a noise reference. With hot summer days (the AC unit) is bound to get noisy again," Wick said. "It dawned on us the park has got really quiet areas, but we've never documented them. We want to visually show the quiet places. If we can document it, we can preserve it."

Even away from the parkway or Churchill Drive, and within the forest, noise can be an issue. New gravel on sections of Whittaker trail at the north end of the park crunch beneath our feet, and irritates Wick. His iPhone decibel metre app spikes to 50 and 60 db as we walk. Standing still it hovers in the low 30s, quieter than a typical library. Health Canada says noise on a major road typically hits about 75 db.

"If you listen for long enough, you become acutely aware of any sounds and car noise," Wick said.

Wick is looking for volunteers to document noise levels at different times of day on the main trails on the mountain and Douglas creek sides of the park, using a zero to four rating system (zero is no car noise; four is standing next to Shelbourne Street). The project is keeping it simple and subjective, and isn't asking people to record decibel levels or sound frequencies.

Harper plans to plot data generated by volunteers on a map to show typical ambient noise levels in all areas of the park, and to create an overall noise baseline. Wick expects to replicate the exercise in five or 10 years to see if urban clatter is making inroads into the forest.

"We want to show where urban noise isn't intruding," Harper said. "Despite being a subjective experience, if enough people participate, the overall average noise volume should be a good representative to a typical daytime noise level."

To participate in the sound map project, see [moundouglaspark.ca](http://moundouglaspark.ca), or email Wick at [darrell@MountDouglasPark.ca](mailto:darrell@MountDouglasPark.ca).

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