

WILD **SOUND**SCAPES



Discovering the *Voice* of the Natural World

BERNIE KRAUSE

Foreword by Roger Payne

*Includes an audio CD featuring sample soundscapes
and narrated field techniques*

Foreword

by Roger Payne

I have always preferred radio to television, agreeing with the old saw that in radio “the images are better.” Back in the 1970s I encountered a wonderful example of that. One summer’s night I found myself out late in Algonquin Park in Canada. We were howling for wolves—trying to record them. Although we got a single very faint answer from a distant wolf, it was not what we wanted; the rest of the recordings from that evening were just the local ambient natural sounds, including the trickle of a nearby brook, some crickets, and a distant wood thrush that was up later than usual, singing its final evening vespers.

During a hard snowstorm in the following winter, I was searching through some tapes for whale songs when I happened upon a tape that was marked with a note saying it had nothing on it and was reusable. I couldn’t imagine what it was, so I put it on. There was the distant wood thrush in his acoustic surrounding: its recorded song instantly transported me back to that summer evening in Canada. The sounds created a flood of feeling, lifting me out of my winter surroundings and setting me down in the midst of hot summer. I can even remember feeling warm, for a moment. This was accomplished more strongly than I would have imagined possible, even though the outside world was frozen clean through its heart. It was a powerful lesson, demonstrating to me that sounds are more evocative than any other sense, even more evocative than the sense of smell where subtle whiffs of familiar odors—such as the smell of grandmother’s house—are able to bring back vivid memories from past decades.

Bernie Krause apparently feels the same way. He notes in this interesting and useful book that: “When recorded sound is at its best, nothing in the human-created visual world, by itself, even comes close to its impact.” He tells the story of when he recorded a jaguar that had followed him through the Amazon jungle one night; after he set up his recording gear and moved a few feet off, the jaguar came silently up to his microphone, sniffed it and then made a low growl. As Krause points out, a photograph of such an event might cause you to smile nervously, but listening to the recording of

the jaguar sniffing and growling, makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up. Krause includes the recording on the compact disc that accompanies this book; you are unlikely ever to forget it—it is utterly chilling. When you listen to it, ask yourself if any moving image has ever evoked such an intense response in you.

Because of the evocative nature of sound, Krause regrets that so few people have either the equipment or the knowledge to record the sounds that would, when listened to later, transport them back to places and situations they have loved, and do better than pictures ever can. One of the most useful parts of his book describes how to get equipped at reasonable cost. He recommends specific pieces of equipment and explains what microphones to use and how they will affect the final result. He also describes some of the tricks of the recording trade.

The most important point made in *Wild Soundscapes* is that it is not the single, dissected-out, cleanly recorded voices of nature that transport you back most vividly to the places where, and the times when, you recorded them. The best 'beaming up' occurs only when such voices are embedded in their own acoustic surroundings—what Krause refers to as their biophonies and geophonies (*biophonies* being the voices of living things, and *geophonies* being the non-creature sounds of the earth such as thunder, rain, and wind).

Biologists such as Krause and myself focus on recording natural soundscapes to secure the experiences we wish to relive later, but he emphasizes that all soundscapes whether natural, urban, or rural possess extraordinary evocative powers. His thesis fights a hard battle; like the photographs in one's family album, no outsider is ever as moved as the person who took them, just as some may not be as moved by a recording as the person who was at a site and recorded its marvelous sounds. Yet, I urge you to take Krause at his word: go out and buy the equipment with which to make your own recordings, and record ambient sounds whenever you are in places you wish to remember. And do this until you are as reflexive about making such recordings as all of us are about taking pictures whenever we find ourselves in places we wish to remember. Krause is right: ambient sounds will get you back to such a place more vividly than any photograph ever can...and they will do so more effectively than you can imagine.

Krause also explores how non-industrial cultures have always depended "on the integrity of undisturbed natural sound for determining a *sense of place*." He cites the BaBenzele (Bayaka) Pygmies who live in the Central African Republic, as an example. When separated from the forest, these people "become physically and mentally stressed and overwhelmed." Krause claims that "natural soundscapes are a physical and spiritual elixir." In contrast, he discusses our noisy modern world as exemplified in the crowds who are drawn to drag races by "the power of noise." He notes, "The louder the sounds we can produce, the more virile we are supposed to feel, absent anything else of consequence that provides us with a sense of self-or spiritual worth."

Krause, like me, prefers it quiet. As he says, "Listening to creature sounds, water trickling in a stream, wind in the trees, and waves at the seashore immediately puts me at ease... Yet, this miraculous biophony—this concerto of the natural world—is now under serious threat of complete annihilation." He makes a strong plea for the critical importance of conserving the acoustic integrity of such places. I predict that this book will become an important voice in support of preserving natural soundscapes.

There are chapters encouraging novice sound recordists to discover unusual things to record, such as singing sand dunes or barnacles moving within their shells. For those who get caught by the recording bug, he suggests grand projects, such as following the route of Lewis and Clark's journey from St. Louis to the Pacific, recording all the way. Or, perhaps, a recording trip that acoustically follows the 1,700-mile journey of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe, beginning in northeastern Oregon, over the Lolo Pass in Idaho, south through the Bitterroot valley, across Yellowstone, and ending at the Bear Paw Battlefield in Montana near the Canadian border. It is difficult to imagine a better way to satisfy a twin interest in history and the outdoors. This is a new way to think about planning a vacation.

There is also a useful section on troubleshooting the problems you will encounter with field recording equipment. His final, excellent advice to someone whose equipment has completely broken down and can't be fixed: "Take a deep breath and enjoy the view. Electronic equipment fails sometimes." Other practical advice includes the admonition never to use insect repellent containing the chemical DEET because "it dissolves everything."

Wild Soundscapes features a wonderful section about where to go to record lovely natural soundscapes. It includes such interesting details, as a great place to see a specific pack of wolves, as well as an aside on President Reagan's infamous comment that, "If you've seen one redwood, you've seen them all." Krause's experience points to just the opposite. Traveling all over the world to record, and comparing what sounds he has been able to capture, Krause says, "They all sound different... if you've heard one beach, you've (only) heard the unique geophony of one beach."

We are late in being able to understand the natural world through sound. Krause points out that, until quite recently, we had no way to store or reproduce sound. Thanks to the more artistic of our cave dwelling ancestors, we know what woolly mammoths looked like eons ago. If those same ancestors had been able to record sound, we would also know what they sounded like. Imagine experiencing a recording of a woolly mammoth trumpeting in the forest outside the cave. What an evocation of a distant time and place.

What Krause's book is calling for is a whole new way of interpreting our world. For that reason and many others, this is a book I recommend you buy, read, and act upon.