

Alissa Settembrino
asettembrino@ithaca.edu
Dr. Sandra Steingraber

Acoustic Ecology & Ethnomusicology: A Climate Change Narrative Bridging Climate Science & Musical Knowledge

Extended Abstract

Our world's dangerously increasing climate crisis is calling for citizens all over the world to contribute their skills and areas of expertise to resolve the affects of climate change in a joint effort. Acoustic ecology, a discipline also known as ecoacoustics or soundscape studies allows for relationships to be made between human beings and the environments in which we inhabit. This form of research that has roots in science and music has been conducted in several regions in the world; it has the potential to offer strong insight into how various wildlife habitats, weather patterns, and animal populations have been affected by climate change and how this damage can potentially be reversed. R. Murray Schafer, a musician, composer and former Professor of Communication Studies at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Burnaby, BC, Canada—suggests that "...we try to hear the acoustic environment as a musical composition and further, that we own responsibility for its composition," (Schafer 1977a, 205). This philosophy towards acoustic ecology aligns with ethnomusicological ideas and how we inhabit a sound-producing environment; the study of various sounds across the globe can influence the human social culture, specifically in the midst of our climate change crisis. While acoustic ecology provides scientific reasoning for the impacts of climate change, ethnomusicology practices help to create a story that the sonic data is telling. Since one purpose of ethnomusicology is to further understand cultures through musical narratives, the fusion of these two disciplines can serve as a guide to create a more tangible meaning for how climate change is impacting the world in which we live; it has the potential to shift the ideals of current climate deniers or to reinforce arguments for those who already support the cause. By combining these two areas of study, one can begin to develop his/her own narrative in relation to how climate change impacts everyday life.

Acoustic ecology, a practice that records and analyzes natural sounds, has previously been used to track environmental changes in Earth's ecosystems and further understand the human-caused impacts on climate change. More specifically, acoustic ecology can "monitor the development of biodiversity in specific habitats sensitive to climate change," (Wrightson). Past research varies from monitoring changes in the anuran ecosystems in Brazil, to collecting data regarding the effects of nuclear radiation to wildlife populations in Japan. This study analyzes the findings of these research projects, among others, and offers an ethnomusicological perspective as to how the sonic findings from the studies can influence our future social culture as our world continues to combat climate change. By examining the connections between climate science and music, one can deepen his/her understanding of the severity of our climate change crisis and gain insight for how to pursue proactivity in resolving this global issue.

The curiosity fueling this project is simple, with the desire to discover why acoustic ecology research is not conducted more often, and how acoustic ecology research findings can be used to take proactive action to combat climate change from a musical standpoint. This project explores a potential climate change narrative to encompass climate science and the power of musical knowledge and sound. The findings from this project were first presented to members of the Ithaca College School of Music community via a brief presentation and concluding survey that summarizes the main points of my research; this was done in order to collect immediate commentary and feedback for initial opinions and potential areas of improvement. The information compiled was then used to form the climate change narrative; those findings, along with the acoustic ecology research influenced the structure and presentation of this study. The purpose of this project is not to convince one of a particular climate change argument, but rather to offer another dimension to what we know as climate change and give the reader an opportunity to begin establishing his/her own climate change narrative.

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