

SOUNDSCAPES

Nature has made nothing silent

Presque rien (Almost nothing – Sunrise by the sea) was the name the composer Luc Ferrari gave to a tape composition from 1970, in which he edited recordings from the morning hours of a harbor town on the Croatian coast into a 21-minute audio piece. No plot was to be depicted, but a sequence of acoustic events, poetically organized. Conceived as a “sonic photographic slide,” the mixture of sounds of human and non-human animals (birds, dogs, cats), footsteps, engines, asphalt, wind and water reveals a transparent local cultural web. Ferrari coined the word “paysage sonore/soundscape” for this.



Even rocks respond to humans, and speech returns when it beats against a cavern wall, and the chatty echo in the woods returns too; the cliffs on the shore cry out, brooks let out a murmur, the bushes on which the Hyblaean bees feed whisper. There are also the musical melodies of the riverbank reeds, and the quivering pine's hair converses with its beloved winds as often as the light south wind leans on its clear-sounding leaves: nature has made nothing silent. The birds in the sky and the four-footed beasts are not silent, and even the snake has its hissing sound and marine herds sigh with what seems like a thin voice.

Ausonius, *Epistola ad Paulinum* 21, 9–19



In 1971, a Canadian composer's group around R. Murray Schafer and Hildegard Westerkamp launched the UNESCO-supported “World Soundscape Project” at Simon Fraser University. Its aim was to record the sounds of areas in order to analyze changes over longer periods of time. In its critical attitude towards the grey “lo-fi” of industrialized cities in contrast to the differentiated “hi-fi” in open nature, the project took on a form of acoustic ecology movement.

At the same time, the term soundscape opened the ears to more than just music: towards a field whose sensual phenomena also required fresh methods of description, a new “spectromorphology” (Denis Smalley).

As the November 1976 issue of the UNESCO Courier shows, among the first disciplines to be infected by the new paradigm of sound were archaeology and historiography, with the question of whether it was possible to reconstruct the soundscapes of past times.



EXPLORING THE NEW SOUNDSCAPE
By R. Murray Schafer

ROCK... POP... AND RISING DECIBELS
By Irmgard Bontinck and Desmond Mark

TUNING IN TO THE PAST
Can we recapture soundscapes of bygone days?
By David Lowenthal

ON INSECT 'WINGS OF SONG'
Photos

EARLY MAN GOES THROUGH THE SPEECH BARRIER
By Aleksey A. Leontyev

MASKED VOICES AND SPOKEN SIGNATURES
Photo story

SOUNDS OF SOUND SCULPTURE

PSYCHOANALYSIS OF SOUND
By Peter Ostwald

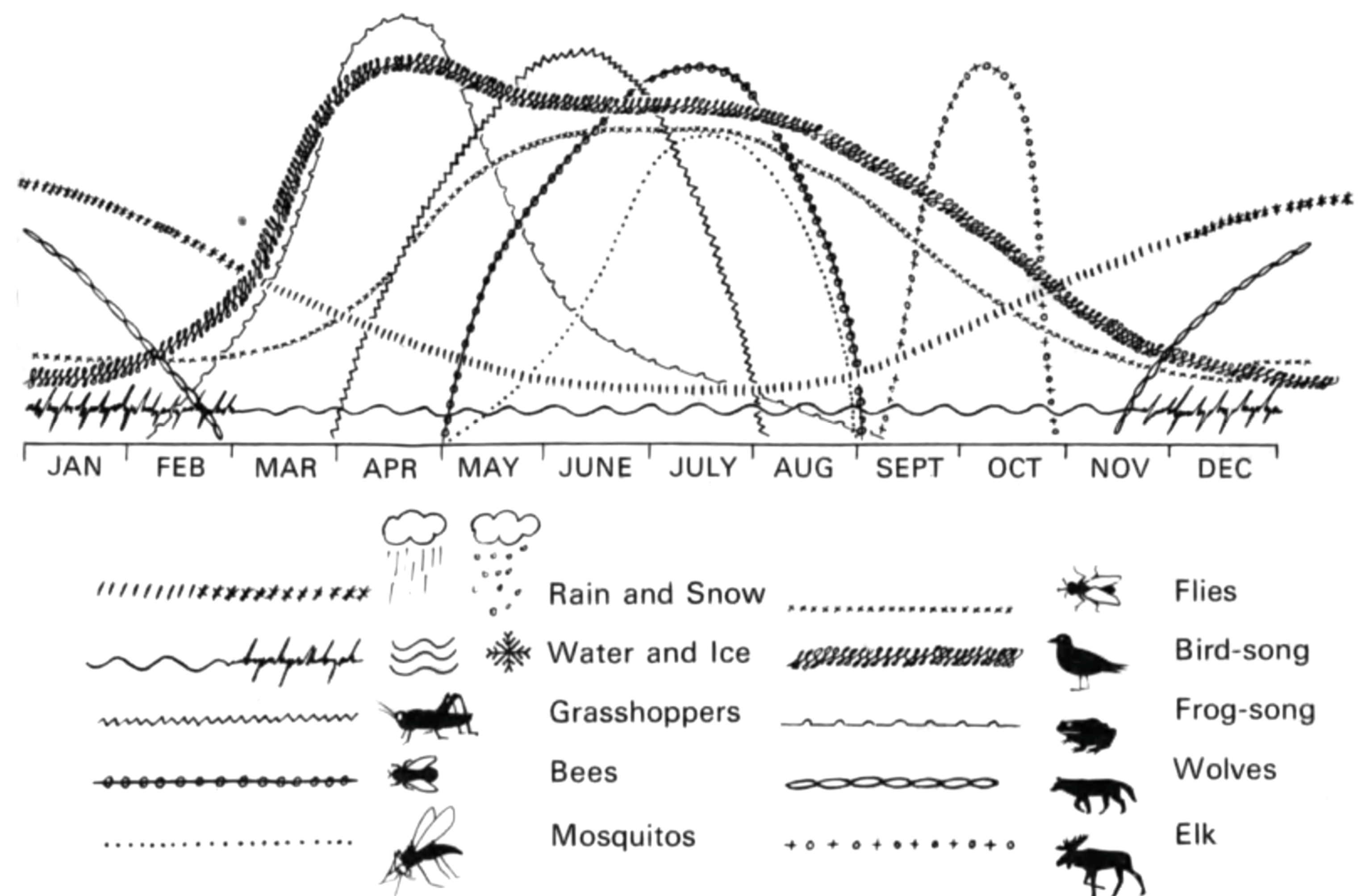
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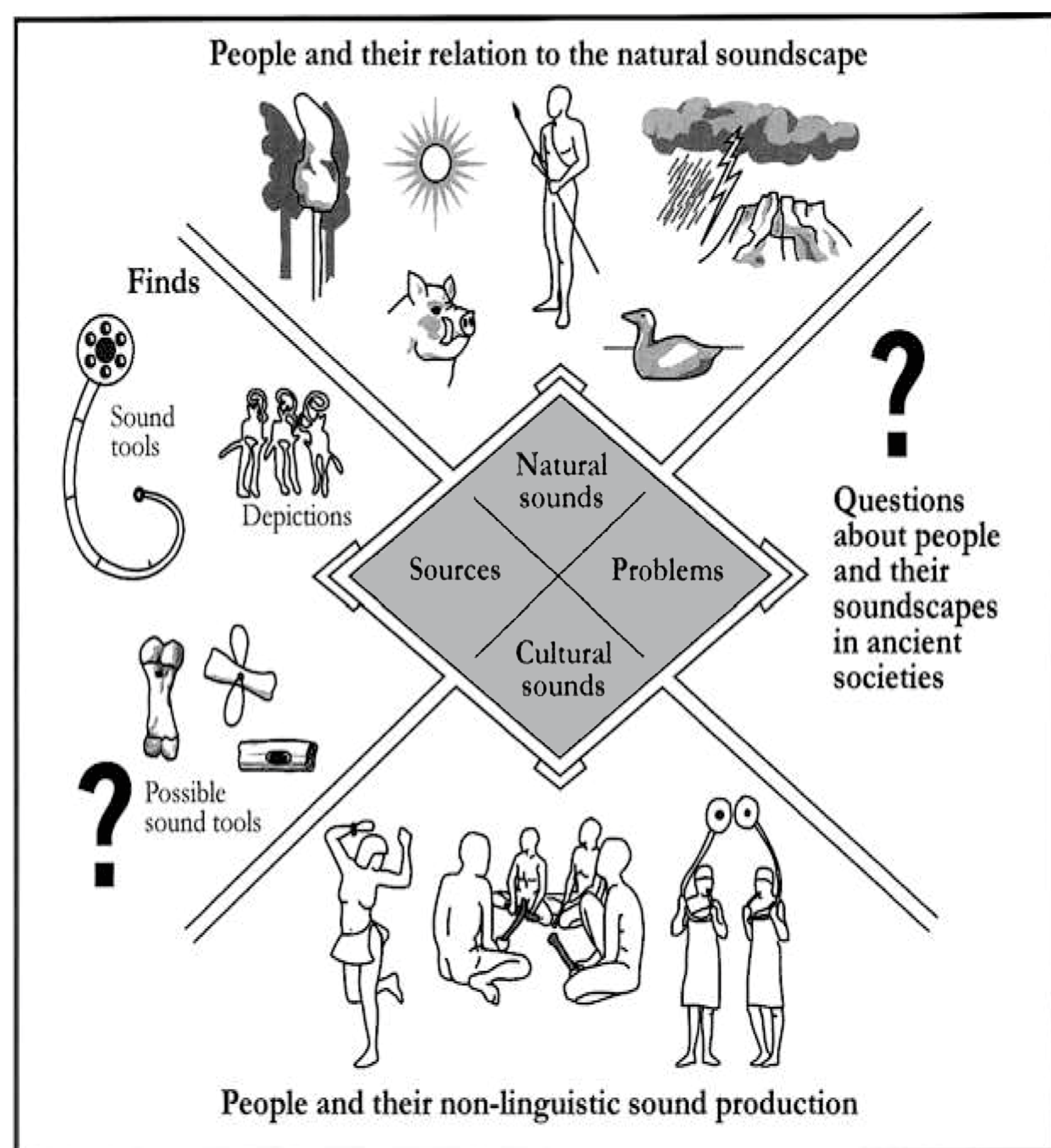
TREASURES OF WORLD ART
HUNGARY: Siren-borne candlestick

A key figure in archaeology who has consistently focused on sound—not ‘music’—is Cajsa S. Lund. She laid the foundations for the research into sound from the 1970s onwards with exhibitions and audio recordings on methodically reconstructed sound tools (*The Sound of Archaeology*, Exhibition Stockholm 1974). An important innovation was to make the reconstructed sounds available and experienceable on audio media (*Forntida klanger*, traveling exhibition with audio 1976; *The Sounds of Prehistoric Scandinavia*, EMI LP 1984). Lund developed an important model of music archaeological research fields that problematizes the process of interpreting sound tools at the intersection of cultural and natural sounds.

CYCLES OF THE NATURAL SOUNDSCAPE OF THE WEST COAST OF BRITISH COLUMBIA BY RELATIVE VOLUME OF SOUNDS



Hear an excerpt from a concert on February 15, 2020, in which the Ensemble Mare Balticum (Musik i Syd, Skåne) transported the audience in Würzburg's Toscana Hall into a prehistoric soundscape.

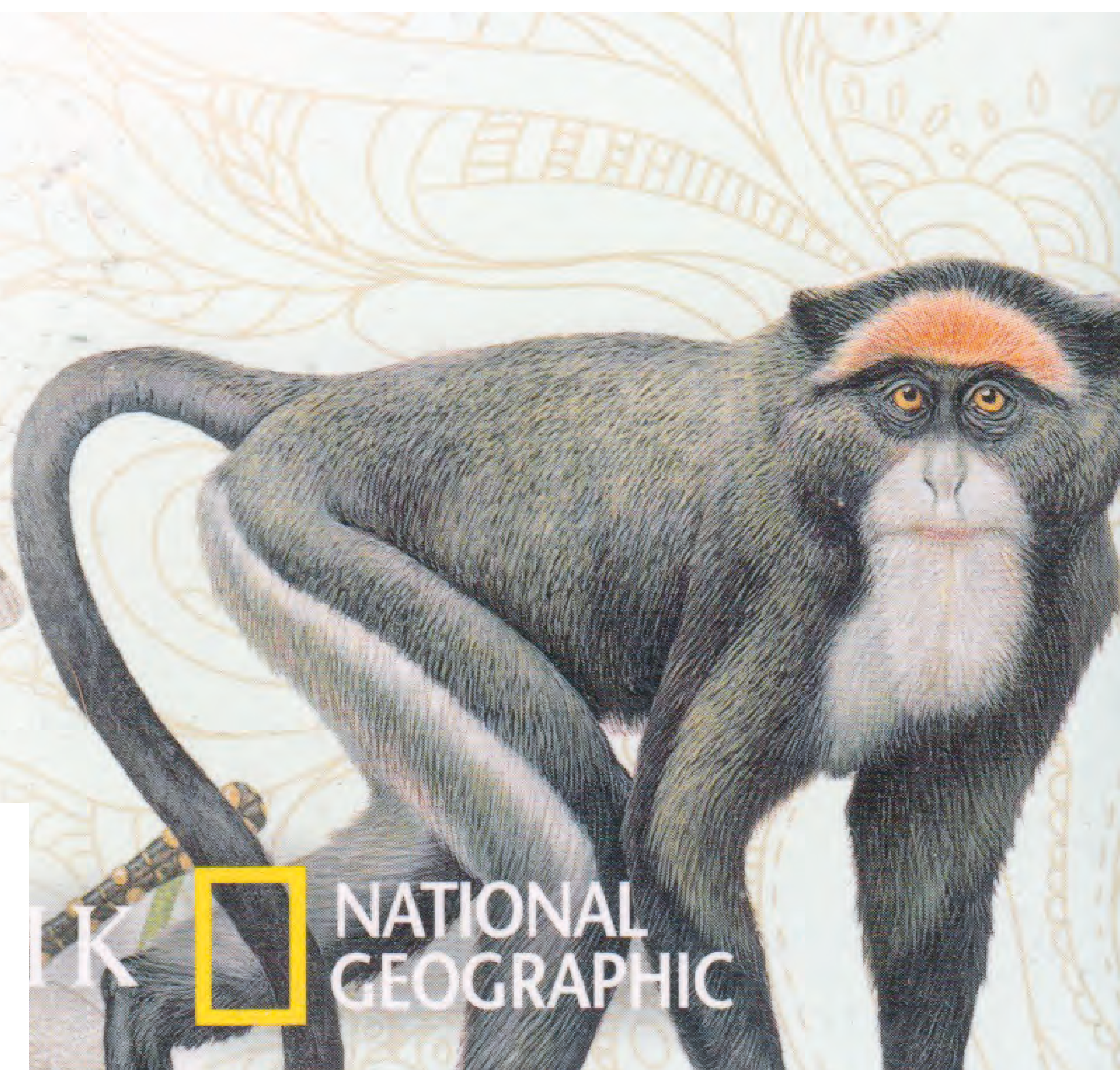


The constituent fields of music-archeological research in Sweden (drawing by C. S. Lund, 2012)

Sound studies has since become a very broad research field, including archaeoacoustics. Rupert Till and Aaron Watson have used impulse response recording and photogrammetry to measure and 3D remodel archaeological sites (EMAP's Soundgate project). The interactive digital models allow users to experience a variety of acoustic spots with the sound of virtual instruments.



A popular variant of soundscape ecology is the work of bioacoustician Bernie Krause, who has collected animal sounds and “biophonies” from unpopulated natural areas during more than 45 years of worldwide travel and field recording. Of the habitats he documented, less than half exist today. In his view, the origins of music lie in natural soundscapes, in the symphony of the “great animal orchestra.”



Watch the recent UNESCO documentary on BIOSPHERE SOUNDSCAPES

