MOTORCYCLE NOISE POLLUTION SILENCES NATURE

Say the word pollution and everyone seems to be against it. Oil-soaked seabirds. Blue-green algae. Mercury blowin' in the wind. Litter. The list is endless.

Extend the concept of pollution to noise and the consensus breaks down. Motorcycle rights organizations insist that their right to ride roaring bikes trumps the right of those who want them quieted. The right to bear arms is specified by our Constitution. The right to remove legally mandated factory-installed noise-abatement mufflers is not.

The Environmental Protection Agency is clear. Motorcycle noise is a pollutant with medical consequences. According to Noise Off, a national noise abatement organization (www.noiseoff.org/motorcycles.php), "all motorcycles are required to display an EPA stamp on the chassis and exhaust system," and the decibel limit for "Standard street-legal exhaust noise emissions is 80 dB." In Connecticut, the biker who pulls up beside you at a red light, and takes off with the loudness of a typical car is playing by the rules. A biker riding anything louder is not.

Noise Off estimates that 60-70 percent of bikers remove the mandated factory-installed exhaust equipment and replace it with something well above the legal limit. These are the exhaust systems you've heard idling with the noise of a helicopter in stop-and-go traffic and causing heart palpitations when they pass you on the interstate. Such noise pollution persists because measuring transient mobile sounds is technically difficult, making fair enforcement expensive and vulnerable to legal challenge. Besides, police have more important things to do.

This column was prompted by an anecdotal and unplanned experiment. With Storrs undergoing massive construction, a book deadline looming and the need for convenient access to family, my wife and I rented a house in Tuftonboro, N.H., on an isthmus between Lake Winnipesaukee and Mirror Lake. I visited both lakes daily, giving me frequent opportunities to monitor the aquatic pollution issues being covered by local media.

Between the lakes is the scenic Gov. John Wentworth Highway, an ancient colonial road that's become the main drag along the east side of Winnipesaukee, New Hampshire's largest lake. Known also as state highway 109, it is a lovely ride through the north woods, with hills, curves, old farms, stone walls and occasional lake views. It's easy to see why bikers love riding there plein air. Though our rental was set back from that road on a corner lot, the rumble of bikes was a relentless daily presence.

Even worse, our lot lay at the top of a short, steep climb that required extra throttle and gave an exciting lift at the crest. As I sat writing day after day, I heard thousands of properly muffled cars whoosh and hum along. Mixed among them were the legal motorbikes, which I could easily distinguish by their distinctive noise. I also heard thousands of very loud bikes roaring along, a few of which sounded like a continuous string of firecrackers.

Never have I heard less ambient natural noise in a woodland environment, especially at dawn when it was eerily quiet, the bird song stilled, the chipmunks mute. I now know why. When writing this column, I discovered a huge literature on bioacoustics showing the compelling link between high biker noise and low wildlife activity.

I'm no killjoy. In fact, I've ridden with joy on the big bike my older brother owns. I just believe, as an old friend used to say, that your personal freedom ends at the tip of my nose. Or, in this case, my ears.
Residents of Connecticut should congratulate themselves for their motorcycle noise abatement regulations, which require motorbikes to operate between 72 and 81 decibels on public streets depending on speed and pavement conditions. Though enforcement ranges from lax to sporadic, it's far better than what takes place in New Hampshire, where current standards allow an amazingly noisy 106 decibels. But public hope springs eternal against public nuisance, even in the "Life Free Or Die" state. After 20 years of citizen advocacy, and hopefully beginning next year, motorcycles in the Granite State will be limited to 92 decibels when idling.

This remains quite loud compared to the Connecticut standard. And it probably exceeds the natural standard needed to bring summer birdsong back to Tuftonboro.