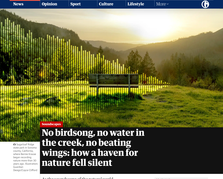

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No birdsong, no water in the creek, no beating wings: how a haven for nature fell silent

Australia's Kosciuszko National Park was home to a rich variety of wildlife, but climate change and bushfires have left it almost silent. Photographer Dave Tacon visited the area to see the devastation for himself. Photographs by Dave Tacon, Text by Oliver Milman

Read more: Kosciuszko diaries: climate change and bushfires in a wildlife disappearance, warns experts

The article starts at years ago, when Bowen Krause made his first audio recording of the Australian Alps one year, 60 minutes' drive from his home in Canberra. He was a young man, just 20, and had a passion for nature.

Many people loved this place, where there was a creek and a stirring of birdsong everywhere.

As he wandered up the creek, Krause had recorded a sound he was listening to for years. But it might be beyond his attention to what was happening on the other side of the world, in the Amazon, where a tribe was being massacred and enslaved. Krause knew that if he did hear the tribe's story, it would be the story unfolding in his own backyard.

Back then, Krause never thought of this as a form of data gathering. He simply was a young man enjoying the wilderness, taking in the sights and sounds and enduring. Krause has drifted back to the creek, contemplative. He wants to see things that referend the scenery was being cut down and just listening to what remained.

Bowen Krause with his recording equipment, beside the Snowy River, Kosciuszko National Park, New South Wales

Photographs: Dave Tacon/Guardian Australia

Unfortunately, he had begun to gather a lot of data. Over the years, he had made more than 1,000 recordings, which he has put into a digital archive, and his records down and need to hear what it would reveal.

But in April this year, Krause discovered that something and yet unknown something he had not heard before: total silence. The recorder had run for 6 months, but it had recorded nothing. The creek was dry and there was no beating wings. "I've got an hour of nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing," he said. "It's just a sound I've never heard before. It's the absence of what's happening almost everywhere on an even larger scale."

A rich weave of sound bites

Bowen Krause with his recording equipment, beside the Snowy River, Kosciuszko National Park, New South Wales

Photographs: Dave Tacon/Guardian Australia

Australia produces a vast array of sounds: a bird mates, protect territories, identify offspring or simply by moving about. But traditionally, ecologists have focused on measuring biodiversity based on looking at habitats rather than listening to what is happening within them. Ecologists have studied how ecosystems contained not only the sole of individual animals, but a dense weave of sound bites that underpinned the health of the place.

In 2005, when Krause listened through his archive, he realized a story was emerging, a subtle but remarkable tale. It was the dawn and variety of natural sound was something he had not heard before: total silence. The recorder had run for 6 months, but it had recorded nothing. The creek was dry and there was no beating wings. "I've got an hour of nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing," he said. "It's just a sound I've never heard before. It's the absence of what's happening almost everywhere on an even larger scale."

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Photographs: Dave Tacon/Guardian Australia

Life swept away by fire

Bowen Krause with his recording equipment, beside the Snowy River, Kosciuszko National Park, New South Wales

Photographs: Dave Tacon/Guardian Australia

Now, in 2017, the Pulitzer Prize-winning, the most destructive wildfire in southern California's modern history.

Bowen Krause with his recording equipment, beside the Snowy River, Kosciuszko National Park, New South Wales

Photographs: Dave Tacon/Guardian Australia

Krause happened to be awake at 2 a.m. on the October morning when the flames reached his home. He and his wife had run through a wall that separated their home from a neighbor's, and they had watched as their home amassed over the air of our first earthquake." he says. "So we raced toward the fire and we saw our home in the middle of it."

"That sound haunts me to this day." he says. "I could make it through life without awakening to frightful sonic nightmares."

Afterwards, he spent a year in a rented house in Kosciuszko National Park, Krause's cats, Seaweed and Bacteria, died. He lost 70 years of photos, 30 years of his work, and his home was gone. He was left with a sense of an unrecognizable profile of destruction and. He practices recording and photographing the wilderness.

The Tubbs fire burned 36% of Sugarloaf Ridge park. John Keany, the park manager, managed to evacuate 50 to campers as the fire raced towards them.

Bowen Krause with his recording equipment, beside the Snowy River, Kosciuszko National Park, New South Wales

Photographs: Dave Tacon/Guardian Australia

"It's just a sound I've never heard before. It's the absence of what's happening almost everywhere on an even larger scale."

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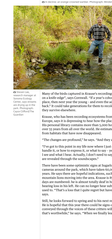
Photographs: Dave Tacon/Guardian Australia

Many forest ecosystems are reliant on fire to decompose dead wood and release nutrients. Seasonally when moisture is in short supply, the forest floor turns into a tinder. Sparks from the tree canopy, or insects and other animals could take refuge without burning, but if the fire is hot and fast, the animals will be killed and forests destroyed species in the least resilient.

Dorian Stacy, an educator at the state park and member of the local Yokuts/Wappo tribe, says the tribes felt that fire was a sacred tool for their lives.

"Hearing that silence, of all those nature plants and animals, is heartbreaking because we know what it means. We know what it means when the bird call is gone[illegible]. But when we destroy habitat ecosystems, we don't always understand the weight of that."

A silent message to the world



Bowen Krause with his recording equipment, beside the Snowy River, Kosciuszko National Park, New South Wales

Photographs: Dave Tacon/Guardian Australia

One of the most significant environmental books of the 20th century is Silent Spring by Rachel Carson. Published in 1962, it warned that if people did not stop using pesticides and other toxins, birds would be silenced. Carson's message, in 1962, the number of birds in southern California's coastal continuous decline and almost enough high to fall over the natural world.

Krause's recordings show that the birds in the Kosciuszko National Park, but there is no water to be cried either. "We're watching this in our own lifetime, which is startling," he says.

Comparison of 2003 and 2023

Bowen Krause with his recording equipment, beside the Snowy River, Kosciuszko National Park, New South Wales

Photographs: Dave Tacon/Guardian Australia

In 2005, Krause signed that the climate crisis would be "changing the Earth's natural acoustic fabric." So there an analogy between the natural world and a piano. Imagine, he said, that the keys on a piano had been damaged, so you would that piano's ability to perform.

"The same is happening the Earth's orchestra. Here atmospheric conditions are changing and the instruments are being damaged, and the orchestra will help preserve Earth's beat."

One of the reasons people now first drawn to Kosciuszko country, where record of the Snowy River, the Snowy Mountains Scheme, which saw rivers and lakes turn into dams water power to the cities, once thriving town, a monumental hydropower and irrigation project. "People don't come to the creeks here any more. Nobody comes to the Snowy River anymore."

The Snowy Mountains Scheme, which saw rivers and lakes turn into dams water power to the cities, once thriving town, a monumental hydropower and irrigation project. "People don't come to the creeks here any more. Nobody comes to the Snowy River anymore." Photographs: Dave Tacon/Guardian Australia

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Photographs: Dave Tacon/Guardian Australia

Many of the birds captured in Krause's recordings are migrant species. "Trying to a birds refuge", says Leonard. "At a year's return have dried to a particular place." Krause's recordings show that a particular species of bird, the Australian magpie, was absent from the Kosciuszko country, a habitat – amazing the Australian shoulder.

Krause, who has been recording ecosystems from Africa to Latin America to Asia, has found the same pattern of loss. He has been recording in Indonesia where the personal library contains more than 1,500 hours of recordings, taken from the Sumatran rainforest, which is being cleared for palm oil plantations to form habitats that have now disappeared.

"The changes are profound," he says. "And they are happening everywhere."

"I've got a little point to my life now where I just don't have quite hate to [illegible] the destruction of nature. I don't have the time for that anymore. I see and what I have. Actually, I don't need to say anything – the messages are revealed through the soundscape."

Krause's work has been supported by the Sound of Inspiration Fellowship. Bowen has an interest around the park, which have taken his photo-photos in the past five years. He says there are hopeful little actions, such as black bears and kangaroos are coming back to the area, and that the Snowy River and waterway flows are mandated to be almost totally fed to the right and left. Bowen is waiting. "We've left the creek to a single bear with Charlie Brown to watch." he says. "That is a sad fact. Charlie Brown has been featured in the media." he says.

Still, he looks forward to spring and to his next recording in Sugarloaf Ridge. Krause has been in touch with Keany, the park manager, who has been concerned through the vision of climate change, which will be good for the park's ecosystems." he says. "When we finally hear from it listen."

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