

## Active Listening via Soundwalks

By: [Aaron S. Allen](#)

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### **Abstract:**

Composer and soundscape artist/scholar Hildegard Westerkamp (1974/2001) defines a soundwalk as "any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment." I would add that only slightly secondary purposes are listening to one's self and one's fellow humans. Most importantly, however, soundwalks encourage active listening.

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### **Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

# Teaching Ecomusicology

## Active Listening via Soundwalks

by Aaron S. Allen

Composer and soundscape artist/scholar Hildegard Westerkamp (1974/2001) defines a soundwalk as “any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment.” I would add that only slightly secondary purposes are listening to one’s self and one’s fellow humans. Most importantly, however, soundwalks encourage active listening.

This remarkably simple yet potentially profound exercise can be used pedagogically. It’s a great way to get a class outside, in good weather or not, and can be done repeatedly for comparative purposes. Soundwalking encourages group bonding through a shared, active experience, and it can be related to a variety of intellectual pursuits in music study (for majors and non-majors) and in environmental and social studies. This brief essay will provide an overview and outline of soundwalking intended to provide newcomers an initial starting point. Feel free to vary your own efforts based on your needs and desires; certainly consider following up with further readings if you want to expand on it (see the web resources at the end of this article). But even neophytes can engage a class (or any other group, or yourself alone!) with ecomusicological ideas through this interesting and accessible exercise. (For advice here, I’m grateful to my colleagues

Tyler Kinneer and Andra McCartney, two expert soundwalk leaders who have opened my ears to this remarkable exercise.)

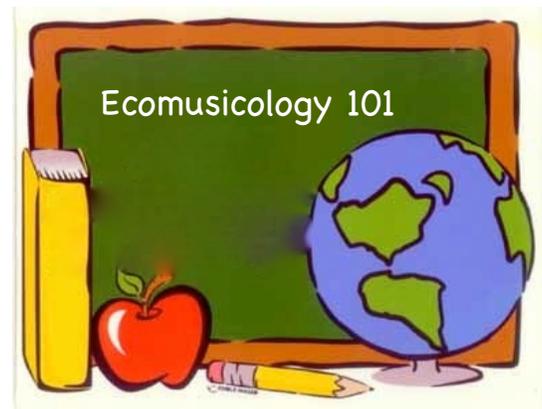
Acoustic ecologists and soundscape artists have long used soundwalks to engage audiences. In essence, as the group leader, or even as a solo participant, you function as a composer, designing a sonic experience for yourself and others. In my opinion, however, what is most important is not the sonic creation, or even the journey, but the ultimate reflections and conversations that result.

A soundwalk exercise itself could take place comfortably in either a 50- or 75-minute class, but 90 minutes is ideal. After some initial planning, a soundwalk can unfold in a three-part structure: introduction, walk, discussion.

Before the actual soundwalk itself, however, the first thing to consider is your planning. It’s a simple point, but: know your environs! Where will you be? On campus, elsewhere? In familiar territory, a new location? Regardless, check out the area in advance. If you cannot physically walk and listen yourself, then do some reconnaissance work via Google Maps or something similar. You can either plan a specific route to follow, have some flexible options within a basic framework, or improvise

completely. Just make sure you don’t end up heading down any potentially dangerous or distracting paths! (Dead ends can be useful, and interesting, but they can also be distracting.) Try to plan for a mix of urbanized and less urbanized places (i.e. “built environment” and “natural environment”), because the contrasts can often be quite interesting.

The introduction of the soundwalk to your group should take just a few minutes. Explain briefly your conception of a soundwalk to the group. You might emphasize that the goal is active listening: both to one’s self and to one’s environment. That environment constitutes everything, not just “nature” but also other people, the built environment, and non-human sounds. Let your group know that an individual’s reactions and feelings to those sounds are as important as any “objective” observations, and that these



subjective, personal emotions will be the subject of discussion at the end of the soundwalk.

The most important thing to do in the introduction, however, is to let your group know that there are two basic ground rules: No talking (unless there's an emergency) and no walking in front of the leader (you). The idea is to proceed in silence; by not talking, either in idle chatter or commenting on sounds heard, one really focuses on listening. Yes, it is sometimes odd to walk in a silent group in a public place, but the rewards of focused listening and the discussion that ensues are worth it. Of course, if someone is in danger or distress, then breaking the silence is certainly warranted. But there's no good reason for group members to dash out in front of you, because you've planned the route and need to set a pace that keeps everyone together. While recording devices can offer an interesting way to preserve, analyze, and document soundwalks, be sure that the technology is not a distraction. Of course, tell your participants to turn off their cell phones!

For the walk itself, make sure not to go too fast. Stop occasionally to just listen. There's no need to keep moving constantly, and occasionally stopping to sit, listen and just be can be focal points of the event. Stopping allows participants to feel comfortable and focus on their listening. Try to find some interesting sounds, be they bird habitats, running water or sonorous trees, or traffic, machinery or other humans. Plan for the walk to be about 30-60 minutes; be sure to consider the

temperature and other climatic conditions that can impact fatigue. Sometimes, less is more; sitting can also lengthen a walk while not making it so strenuous.

The ensuing discussion is where you, as a leader, will need to both continue being a curator and composer while also taking a back seat to the ideas and opinions of others. This is the challenge for all teachers in leading a discussion, of course, but realize here that the benefits of soundwalking are intensely personal, so participants should have the opportunity to reflect on, and ideally share, their experiences. You might emphasize free speech or brainstorming; don't try to direct the discussion too much, because the important aspect is to allow individual experiences to become meaningful, even if they are different from other experiences. You might start generally: "What did you hear?"—and see what bubbles up. Of course, one potential problem with such an open-ended question is the response that simply tries to recount every place walked and every sound heard! Depending on the group, or just for the sake of making it clear, you might start instead with a variation on that question: "What do you think/feel about something you heard?"

For the discussion, model patient listening yourself, and give your participants an opportunity to collect their thoughts before you contribute your own observations. You might ask about extremes: "What was the [loudest/softest/most unusual/most common] you heard?" These little things could start connections between experiences that could

lead to further discussion. Or you might make (or encourage) some specific connections yourself, for example: "Did you notice how sound X interacted with sound Y?" Or "Why do you think that sound Z stood out / was so hard to notice?" Or "Did you notice any patterns or relationships among sounds on our walk?" Then you might consider some changing dynamics, such as "Did you notice how your own listening changed over time?" And of course, you might build the discussion to discuss bigger ideas: What does that sound mean? What does it indicate about the state of our world / our place in the world / our relationships with each other?

A group soundwalk is not an everyday experience, but it can attune us to pay more attention to our everyday experiences. And eventually, soundwalking can become a regular, personal experience; as Westerkamp notes, "Wherever we go we will give our ears priority." This exercise can be approached quite simply as an introduction for all sorts of listeners with all sorts of backgrounds because, even if you are already an active listener, hearing how others listen can be mind- and ear-opening. And doing that matters for understanding our sonic world—and each other.

#### **Web Resources:**

Andra McCartney:  
[soundwalkinginteractions.wordpress.com](http://soundwalkinginteractions.wordpress.com)  
 Hildegard Westerkamp:  
[www.sfu.ca/~westerka/writings.html](http://www.sfu.ca/~westerka/writings.html)  
 Ecomusicology Bibliography:  
[www.ecomusicology.info/resources/bibliography/](http://www.ecomusicology.info/resources/bibliography/)

