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It's time to listen: there is much to be learned from the sounds of tropical ecosystems

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7 **It's time to listen: there is much to be learned from the sounds of tropical ecosystems**

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3 46 **“The universe is your orchestra. Let nothing less be the territory of your new studies.” –**
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5 47 **Raymond Murray Schafer (1969)**
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10 49 KNOWLEDGE THAT CAN BE GAINED FROM ACOUSTIC DATA COLLECTION IN TROPICAL ECOSYSTEMS
11
12 50 is low-hanging fruit. There is every reason to record and with every day, there are fewer excuses
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14 51 not to do it. In recent years, the cost of acoustic recorders has decreased substantially (some can
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16 52 be purchased for under \$50, e.g., Hill *et al.* 2018) and technology needed to store and analyze
17
18 53 acoustic data is continuously improving (e.g., Corrada Bravo *et al.* 2017, Xie *et al.* 2017).
19
20 54 Soundscape recordings provide a permanent record of a site at a given time and contain a wealth
21
22 55 of invaluable and irreplaceable information. Although challenges remain, failure to collect
23
24 56 acoustic data now in tropical ecosystems would represent a failure to future generations of
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26 57 tropical researchers and the citizens that benefit from ecological research. In this commentary,
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28 58 we (1) argue for the need to increase acoustic monitoring in tropical systems; (2) describe the
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30 59 types of research questions and conservation issues that can be addressed with passive acoustic
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32 60 monitoring (PAM) using both short and long-term data in terrestrial and freshwater habitats; and
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34 61 (3) present an initial plan for establishing a global repository of tropical recordings.
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42 63 In an era of rapid environmental change, remote sensing methods are particularly
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44 64 important for ecology and conservation biology because they produce consistent data streams
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46 65 that can be analyzed over different spatial and temporal scales (Kerr & Ostrovsky 2003, Turner
47
48 66 *et al.* 2003, Nagendra *et al.* 2013). Passive acoustic monitoring (PAM) is one way to characterize
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50 67 and evaluate ecosystems remotely using sounds. First developed for use in the marine realm
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52 68 (Tavolga 2012), autonomous recordings can detect a range of sounds produced by natural and
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3 69 physical phenomena (Krause 1987). The “soundscape” includes all sounds emanating from any
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5 70 given habitat, which can be classified with respect to their source: geophony (climate and
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7 71 geography), biophony (all wildlife) and anthrophony (human activities; Pijanowski *et al.* 2011).
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9
10 72 Analysis and monitoring of these various contributions to a soundscape permits rapid
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12 73 assessments of biodiversity as well as the health and stability of an ecosystem (e.g., Blumstein *et*
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14 74 *al.* 2011, Pijanowski *et al.* 2011, Fuller *et al.* 2015, Bertucci *et al.* 2016, Burivalova *et al.* 2017,
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16 75 Deichmann *et al.* 2017, Staaterman *et al.* 2017).
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22 77 **APPLICATIONS OF ECOACOUSTICS IN THE TROPICS**
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24 78
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26 79 Many tropical biologists have been startled by the sound of a nearby tree fall, while others have
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28 80 been warned of an oncoming storm by croaking toucans or the presence of a predator by
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30 81 screeching squirrel monkeys; yet many of us have never considered that these sounds are data
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32 82 that can be harnessed to answer questions about tropical ecosystems. Here are a few examples of
33
34 83 the types of questions that can be answered using sounds:
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38 84
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40 85 **POPULATION DYNAMICS AND ACTIVITY PATTERNS.**— We know very little about the natural
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42 86 activity fluctuations within tropical forest communities, and perhaps even less in tropical
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44 87 freshwater systems. Thus, it is difficult to precisely assign causal relationships between human
45
46 88 activities and changes in biodiversity (Thompson 2003). For example, is the decline in
47
48 89 abundance of a hornbill species in an Indonesian forest a part of a naturally-occurring seasonal
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50 90 and super-annual fluctuation pattern, or is the population actually decreasing due to hunting,
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52 91 logging, and habitat loss? If measurements are taken during a ‘low’ part of an undetected cycle,
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3 92 small population numbers could make the impact of an otherwise-sustainable hunting practice
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5 93 appear catastrophic. Alternatively, unsustainable hunting rates could be seen as deceptively
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8 94 benign if measurements were taken during a peak time. Recording soundscapes regularly to span
9
10 95 the natural cycles of animal activity helps us correctly understand these patterns (Bridges *et al.*
11
12 96 2000, Towsey *et al.* 2014, Linke *et al.* In Review), which otherwise would be extremely difficult
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14
15 97 to decipher using traditional biodiversity monitoring methods.
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17 98

19 99 BROAD SPATIAL SCALES.— Our current methods for comparing biodiversity of multiple habitats
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21 100 (beta diversity) are insufficient. This task is notoriously difficult in tropical forests and streams
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23
24 101 due to the sheer number of species present and the amount of sampling necessary. The ability to
25
26 102 deploy multiple acoustic sensors across landscapes in a short period of time enables
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28 103 simultaneous recording, which allows researchers to make meaningful comparisons and tackle
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31 104 elusive patterns in tropical forest and freshwater fauna (e.g., Bormpoudakis *et al.* 2013, Gasc *et*
32
33 105 *al.* 2013, Rodriguez *et al.* 2014). For instance, PAM can improve our understanding of
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35 106 ecological processes across entire elevational gradients helping us to track the impact of climate
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38 107 change on animal distributions (Campos-Cerqueira *et al.* 2017).
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42 109 RAPID INVENTORIES AND SPECIES OF CONSERVATION CONCERN.— The presence of rare and
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44 110 cryptic species in tropical habitats are difficult to detect in short trips to the field (Thompson
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47 111 2003, Plaisance *et al.* 2011), but PAM methods have been successfully used to detect such
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49 112 animals in densely forested habitats, producing results that would otherwise require massive
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52 113 search efforts by field crews. For example, PAM has been used to estimate presence and
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54 114 abundance of African forest elephants (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) inhabiting dense rainforests of
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3 115 Central Africa (Wrege *et al.* 2017) as well as cryptic fish in tropical coastal habitats (Staaterman
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5 116 *et al.* 2017) and an endemic and threatened bird in Puerto Rican Mountains (Campos-Cerqueira
6
7 117 & Aide 2016). Invasive species such as fish (Rountree & Juanes 2017) and pest insects (Mankin
8
9 118 *et al.* 2011) have also been detected using PAM. Likewise, PAM can detect the recovery of
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11 119 species extirpated from a site after natural disaster, disease or other perturbation (Butler *et al.*
12
13 120 2016). The ability for PAM data to be collected rapidly from many places but analyzed later
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15 121 makes it a valuable tool for rapid inventories (Sueur *et al.* 2008, Ribeiro *et al.* 2017), which tend
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17 122 to be costly and difficult to fund.
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24 124 HUMAN IMPACTS AND SHIFTING BASELINES.— Comparing soundscapes in areas under different
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26 125 management regimes allows for a rapid understanding of the intensity of impact caused by
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28 126 different human activities (e.g., Alvarez-Berrios *et al.* 2016, Burivalova *et al.* 2017, Deichmann
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30 127 *et al.* 2017). Examples include changes in habitat structure (Tonolla *et al.* 2010, Geay *et al.*
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32 128 2017) or levels of hunting activity in protected areas (Astaras *et al.* 2017). Furthermore, acoustic
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34 129 data collected over the long-term can be used to answer broader questions regarding the effects
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36 130 of environmental change on species abundance, phenology, distribution (Campos-Cerqueira &
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38 131 Aide 2017, Campos-Cerqueira *et al.* 2017) and behavior (Llusia *et al.* 2013, Narins &
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40 132 Meenderink 2014). For example, acoustic monitoring has been used to demonstrate changes in
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42 133 the seasonal onset of birdsong (Buxton *et al.* 2016), which may be indicative of climatic
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44 134 influences on the timing of reproduction. Acoustic “time-capsules” – measurements made in the
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46 135 past or the present – will be critically important for similar observations in the decades to come.
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52 53 137 **ADVANTAGES OF PASSIVE ACOUSTIC MONITORING**

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6 139 Using PAM, rather than traditional methods, to monitor and analyze biodiversity will help us do
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8 140 a better job of understanding and conserving tropical terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems.
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10 141 Netting, trapping, distance sampling, visual transects, etc. are labor-intensive, expensive and
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12 142 logistically impractical in many places – often even more so in the tropics than in the temperates.
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14 143 In addition, most observations of animal behavior are influenced by human presence and limited
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17 144 to daylight hours. Crucially, the autonomous nature of acoustic sensors permits continuous
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19 145 collection of PAM data without biases from the “observer effect” (Shonfield & Bayne 2017).
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21 146 PAM can cover broad spatial and temporal scales, including simultaneous and long-term
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23 147 monitoring, which is simply not possible with traditional methods (Linke *et al.* In Press). This
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26 148 can even be done in real-time (e.g. Van Parijs *et al.* 2009, Aide *et al.* 2013), providing
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28 149 researchers and managers with information necessary for immediate decision-making, and make
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30 150 adaptive management more feasible. Finally, collection of big data through PAM creates
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33 151 permanent records that can be re-analyzed when new analytical tools become available, when
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35 152 additional research questions arise, or to compare past to present conditions.
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40 154 The related technique of camera trapping has greatly improved our capacity to estimate species
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42 155 composition, abundance and density of medium to large-bodied mammals and birds – groups
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44 156 that are difficult to study using traditional methods – in terrestrial (Burton *et al.* 2015) and
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46 157 arboreal habitats (Gregory *et al.* 2014). That said, camera trapping is restricted to this subset of
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48 158 species (but see Hobbs & Brehme 2017) and the detection range is relatively limited. PAM has
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50 159 the additional benefit of having broader detection ranges [e.g., maximum 1km detection radius
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53 160 calculated for primate sounds (Kalan *et al.* 2015); up to many km depending on frequency,
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3 161 microphone height and habitat type (Darras *et al.* 2016)] and sampling a wider range of
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5 162 taxonomic groups (Aide *et al.* 2017). We consider camera trapping and acoustic monitoring to be
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8 163 complementary in terms of taxonomic groups and advocate the use of both methods where
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10 164 possible.

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13 14 166 **CHALLENGES**

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19 168 While PAM holds many advantages over other methods, it would be remiss not to recognize that
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21 169 challenges do exist. For example, as with other methods that result in the collection of big data,
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24 170 PAM faces the challenge of data storage and management. Storing recordings on multiple hard
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26 171 drives is not expensive, but it is not a particularly effective way to encourage their use in
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28 172 analyses by the broader community. Furthermore, extracting meaningful biological information
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31 173 from recordings is complex. Automated detection tools for species-level analyses have advanced
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33 174 significantly over the last decades (e.g., Aide *et al.* 2013, Kalan *et al.* 2015, de Camargo *et al.*
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35 175 2017). Still, there are limitations to automatic approaches because they require training data to
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38 176 create different classifiers for different species and programming or signal processing expertise
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40 177 to develop automated species identification models, among others. At the soundscape level,
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42 178 many acoustic indices and soundscape analysis methods have been proposed and used for the
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45 179 assessment of biodiversity (e.g., Sueur *et al.* 2008, Pieretti *et al.* 2011, Villanueva-Rivera *et al.*
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47 180 2011, Gasc *et al.* 2013, Fuller *et al.* 2015, Vega *et al.* 2016, Aide *et al.* 2017, Rankin & Axel
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49 181 2017), yet there is no consensus to date as to which are most effective, primarily due to the
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51 182 difficulties in generalizing across taxa and ecosystems (Buxton *et al.* 2018). Existing indices can
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54 183 also be sensitive to geophony like rain, wind, and river flow, or can be skewed by certain

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3 184 acoustically-dominant species (Staaterman *et al.* 2017, Linke *et al.* In Review). Most also lack
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5 185 measures of uncertainty (e.g., detection probabilities) – an issue likely to be exacerbated in
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7 186 highly diverse tropical habitats. Nevertheless, collection of acoustic data now opens up the
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10 187 possibility of analyzing long time series of sounds in the future as analytical methods become
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12 188 more advanced and standardized – a possibility that can only be realized if we start recording
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15 189 now.

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19 191 **BROADER IMPACTS OF ECOACOUSTICS**

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24 193 In addition to serving as permanent records of ecosystem health and providing data for scientific
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26 194 research, animal sounds can serve as an alluring tool for engaging public audiences. Camera
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28 195 trapping has been successful for many reasons, but chief among them is the charismatic nature of
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31 196 the resulting photographs - who doesn't smile when they see wildlife "selfies" or animals caught
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33 197 in the act of defiling a camera? We argue that sounds can be just as captivating - many of us have
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35 198 seen public audiences become wide-eyed when we play them a unique, previously-unknown
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38 199 animal sound. Ecoacousticians have successfully enlisted the help of citizen scientists to gather
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40 200 data on bats (e.g., *Bat Detective*: www.batdetective.org), birds (e.g., *eBird*: ebird.org) and to
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42 201 record soundscapes on a global scale (*Record the Earth*: www.recordtheearth.org). Italian sound
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44 202 artist David Monacchi's *Fragments of Extinction* project, initiated in 2001, records the world's
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47 203 undisturbed primary equatorial forests to highlight disappearing soundscapes and brings attention
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49 204 and urgency to the ongoing loss of a 'sonic heritage of millions of years of evolution' (Monacchi
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51 205 & Krause 2017). Ecological sound art is an effective medium for science dissemination and
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54 206 immersive experiences of soundscapes can engage listeners at an emotional level. This acts as a

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3 207 powerful and accessible tool for inspiring public awareness about the value of ecoacoustics and
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5 208 ecosystem health in general (Monacchi & Krause 2017) and its efficacy in driving behavior
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8 209 changes is another interesting topic for scientific investigation.
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11 211 **A WAY FORWARD**

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17 213 With the increasing popularity of PAM and rapid flurry of analytical tools, it is now necessary to
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19 214 take advantage of obvious opportunities for acoustic data collection, to develop standards for
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21 215 data collection that allow cross-site comparisons, and to create an open repository to store,
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24 216 visualize and share recordings.
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28 218 COLLECT MORE DATA.— Just as a meteorological station has become a standard and invaluable
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31 219 accessory at biological field stations, there should also be a permanent acoustic recorder. Anyone
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33 220 can put out a recorder, and researchers with long-term field programs are in a particularly good
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35 221 position to conduct passive acoustic monitoring for biodiversity. Long-term research sites
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37 222 typically have metadata related to vegetation composition and structure, faunal richness and
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39 223 abundance, and/or physical landscape variables that can be used together with acoustic data to
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41 224 create and validate population, community, and soundscape monitoring models. Detailed
42
43 225 methods for collecting ecoacoustic data and a review of available hardware can be found in
44
45 226 WWF's guide to acoustic monitoring (Browning *et al.* 2017); we encourage researchers to
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47 227 consult this report and take advantage of their field sites by beginning to compile invaluable
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49 228 long-term acoustic datasets that will contribute to compiling a global database.
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3 230 STANDARDIZED ACOUSTIC DATA COLLECTION.— To build a comprehensive PAM program, one
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5 231 needs to acquire the necessary hardware and software, develop a method for data collection, and
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7 232 determine a plan for storage of acoustic data files and associated metadata. While we understand
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10 233 that every PAM project will have specific requirements to address the research questions of
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12 234 interest, the best way to maximize the utility of any PAM effort is to follow a standard storage
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14 235 and metadata protocol. We strongly encourage researchers to use the data storage and metadata
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16 236 standards proposed by Roch *et al.* (2016). When acoustic data are organized and annotated in a
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19 237 uniform way, it allows other researchers (present-day or future) to utilize the data for additional
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21 238 questions.
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26 240 A GLOBAL DATABASE.— With global data being increasingly publicly available in the ecological
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28 241 sciences (e.g., TRY, GBIF, GenBank, BOLD, eMammal, etc), only a limited fraction meets the
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30 242 best practices standards defined by Joppa *et al.* (2016). Ideally, data should be freely available at
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32 243 high spatial resolution, up-to-date, user-friendly and assessed for accuracy, thereby increasing
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34 244 our ability to answer broad questions and improve its utility for conservation management. The
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36 245 Macaulay Library (<https://www.macaulaylibrary.org/>) and xeno-canto ([https://www.xeno-](https://www.xeno-canto.org/)
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38 246 [canto.org/](https://www.xeno-canto.org/)) are two large databases that house bioacoustic data, but only the latter allows full-
39
40 247 soundscape recordings to be uploaded. Existing ecoacoustics databases include ARBIMON
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42 248 (<https://arbimon.sieve-analytics.com/home>), the Remote Environmental Assessment Laboratory
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44 249 (REAL, <http://lib.real.msu.edu/>), Ecosounds (<http://ecosounds.org>), and the Center for Global
45
46 250 Soundscapes (<https://centerforglobalsoundscapes.org>), although only the first allows users to
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48 251 upload their own data. For marine acoustic data, there is support across federal agencies to
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50 252 archive PAM recordings at the National Center for Environmental Information (NCEI);
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3 253 terrestrial and freshwater ecologists must follow suit. A free platform for soundscape storage to
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5 254 enable future temporal and spatial comparisons is absolutely necessary to advance tropical
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8 255 ecology and conservation.
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11 12 257 **CONCLUSION**

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17 259 We are convinced that PAM is a powerful tool that can be used to assess biodiversity over a
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19 260 range of spatial and temporal scales, and can detect rare species, human impacts, and climatic
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21 261 shifts. Just as a plant or animal voucher specimen can provide information on diet, disease, and
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23 262 evolutionary relationships, so too can a sound recording provide information on species
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26 263 occurrence, density, distribution, phenology, inter- and intraspecific communication, and much
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28 264 more. The rapid proliferation of acoustic recorders and analysis algorithms makes this an
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31 265 exciting frontier in tropical ecology, yet we urge scientists to create standards in our approach to
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33 266 data collection, analysis and archiving that will amplify the utility of recordings. What PAM can
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35 267 reveal will be invaluable in future decades as tropical ecosystems continue to change.
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48
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