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Sensors in city park sound out how people and nature coexist

Innovative sound technology is set to reveal how city dwellers might better tune in to the natural world around them.

Sensors placed in a green space in central Edinburgh will capture ultrasonic and audible noises of bats, birds and other wildlife, as well as traffic and human activity.

The CitySounds project seeks to provide fresh understanding of the ways in which people and nature coexist, while charting the richness and diversity of a much-loved public park, the Meadows.

Project leaders hope the results can inform new approaches that improve people's lives.

The sounds will be combined with other data from the sensors, such as light levels, humidity and temperature, to answer a range of questions about the city's interactions with nature. Captured sounds will be processed to anonymise any human speech.

Findings could, for instance, reveal the activity of the bat population; ways in which traffic noise influences animals' activities; or highlight seasonal variations in people's behaviour.

The outcomes could inform how land is used for the benefit of people, wildlife and the economy, and increase the quality of urban green space. Data from the project will be used to inspire an interactive sound artwork.

The experiment forms part of the University of Edinburgh's Internet of Things initiative, which is exploring ways in which internet-connected devices can enrich everyday life.

It is led by Edinburgh Living Lab, a city-wide collaboration founded by the City of Edinburgh Council and the University of Edinburgh, and is working with partner organisations such as the Scottish Wildlife Trust and community groups such as Friends of the Meadows and Bruntsfield Links.

Professor Ewan Klein, of the University of Edinburgh's School of Informatics, said: "Sounds tell us so much about what's happening around us – birds in a garden, a night on the town, or fire engines rushing to an emergency – but this can be pushed to the back of our awareness.

"The CitySounds project will be valuable in exploring and celebrating the richness of urban sounds, benefiting from developments in digital technology and network infrastructure."

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Yusef Samari, of Friends of the Meadows and Bruntsfield Links, said: “We are delighted to be involved in this project, which is giving us an entirely new perspective on our much-loved park. We look forward to finding out what the sounds of the Meadows can tell us, particularly regarding its wildlife.”

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