What do you discover when you listen to one of the most iconic rivers in the world? A unique project between a scientist, an artist, and a musician plunges into an audio world beneath the surface of the River Thames.
“Listening to the Thames” is a combined art and science project assessing the ecological health of the River Thames.

The project is the brainchild of Dr Toby Gifford (the musician), Dr Simon Linke (the scientist) and Dr Leah Barclay (the artist) that July this year saw two hydrophones submerged in one of the world’s best known and most significant waterways.

The resulting audio was streamed, processed and visualised in real-time from the HMS Belfast on the Thames, and featured prominently as an installation at the 25th anniversary of the Electronic Visualisation in the Arts Conference in London’s Covent Garden.

Spearheaded by Dr Linke and Dr Gifford, the project is part of a Griffith initiative to develop freshwater bioacoustics for ecological health assessment.

Dr Linke is a Senior Research Fellow in the Australian Rivers Institute (ARI), the country’s largest university aquatic ecosystem research group. Dr Gifford is Lecturer in Digital Arts at the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU), while Dr Barclay is a composer, sound artist and creative producer who recently completed her PhD at the QCGU.

By unveiling the usually hidden sonic aspect of the underwater environment, the Griffith team hopes to increase awareness of the value of aquatic bioacoustics in comparing and gauging the health of rivers.

“Our installation in London was a great example of art and science learning from each other by revealing the impact of the surrounding urban environment through digital composition” says Dr Gifford.

Adds Dr Barclay: “We found that the water quality of the Thames was dramatically different from rivers in Australia, but it’s often quite a surprise to hear exactly what sounds emerge once you drop the hydrophones in the water.”

“We heard lots of urban aquatic soundscapes, tourist boats and ferries, but we did hear fish too. In our current state of environmental crisis, this type of assessment is critical to understanding the rapid ecological changes taking place across the globe.”

Dr Linke says non-invasive environmental monitoring has blossomed in the past decade.

“There has been a particular focus on the importance of soundscape conservation, the impact of noise pollution and the value of these soundscapes to assist in biodiversity analysis,” he says.

The Griffith team has been awarded a prestigious Synapse residency from the Australian Network for Art and Technology (ANAT) enabling collaboration between artists and scientists.

The residency will further Dr Barclay’s long-term engagement with soundscape ecology and bioacoustics and will continue in Australia from now through to December as the group explores new methods for acoustically monitoring the Brisbane River, Mary River and Noosa River.

The trio also intends to return to London and extend the project to multiple locations along the Thames in collaboration with local communities.

Know More.

Dr Simon Linke
Australian Rivers Institute