

Acoustic Environment and Soundscape Resource Summary Overmountain Victory National Historic

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Natural Resource Stewardship and Science
Natural Sounds & Night Skies Division



The acoustic environment is a resource with intrinsic value. It is important as a natural resource, a cultural resource, or both. It is a critical component of wilderness character and plays an important role in wildlife communication, behavior, and other ecological processes. Results from multiple surveys of the American public indicate that hearing the sounds of nature is an important reason for visiting national parks. Therefore, the value of acoustic environments and soundscapes is related to an array of park resources and has broad implications for park management. The quality of the acoustic environment is relevant in nearly every unit in the NPS System. When developing the foundation document, park staff should consider the acoustic environment as a resource with inherent value. The topics in Attachment 1 discuss the importance of the soundscape and the acoustic environment in relation to park resources and values.

At **Overmountain Victory NHT**, protecting acoustic resources and noise reduction are related to these park priorities:

- enhancing visitor experience
- conducting interpretive programs regarding
- The rural, historic and commemorative settings throughout the trail
- diverse flora and fauna

Potential Threats

- Noise from park facilities and operations
- Noise from nearby development, transportation, and aircraft
- Noise from visitors such as visitor vehicles, music, shouting, electronics

Potential Opportunities

- Reduce noise from park operations (time activities to preserve quiet times, purchase quieter equipment)
- Communicate with visitors about benefits of noise reduction to park experience and wildlife health

Existing data/planning:

- Predicted acoustic conditions based on continental geospatial sound model

Future data/planning:

- Collect acoustic data to measure baseline acoustic conditions
- Develop acoustic goals, indicators and standards in an acoustic resources plan or other related park plan such as transportation or visitor use.

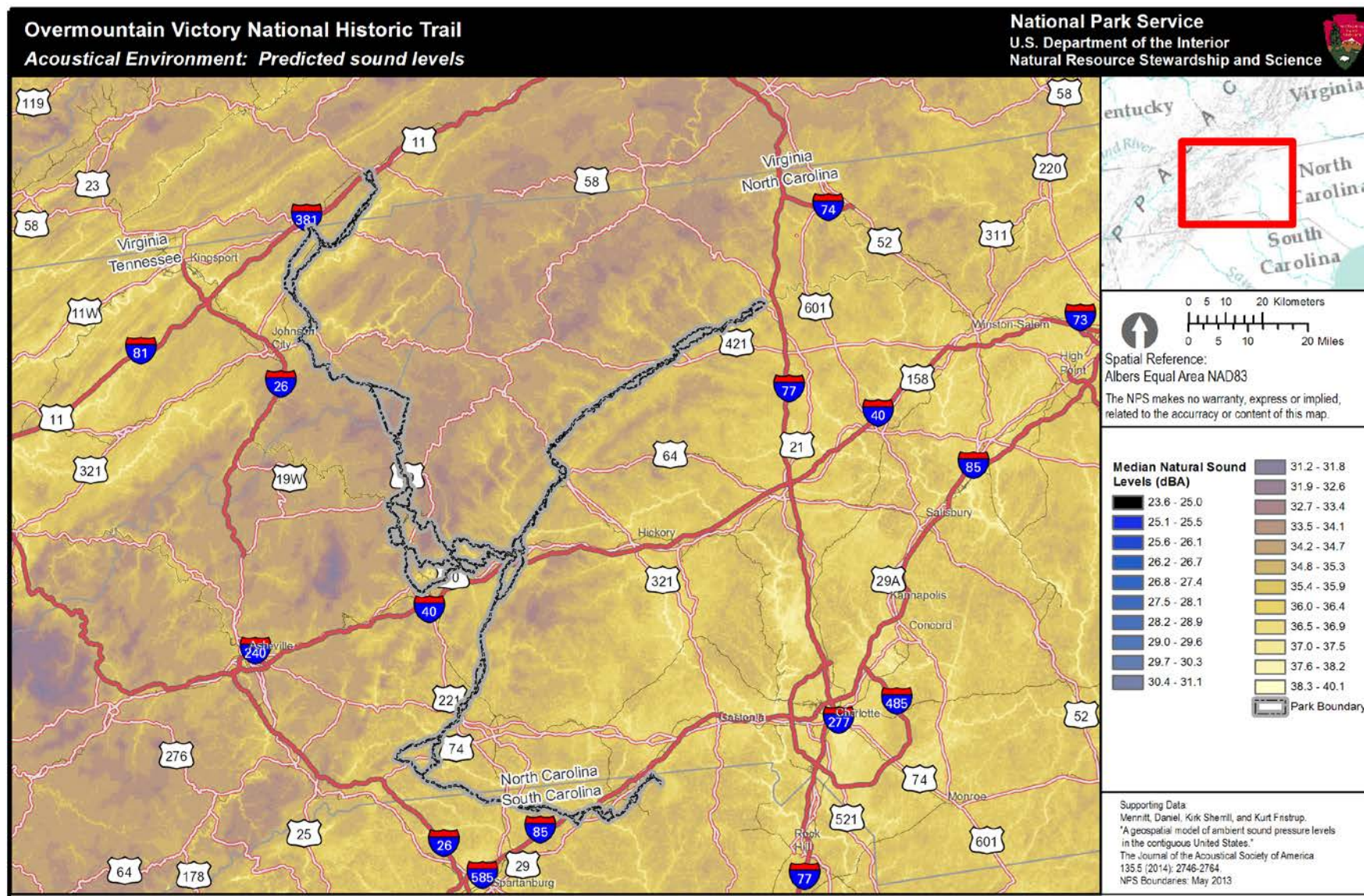
Quality of the Resource at Overmountain Victory NHT

A single parameter that is useful for assessing a park's acoustic environment is the impact of man-made sound sources in relation to natural acoustic conditions. The Natural Sounds and Night Skies Division (NSNSD) estimates the impacts using predictions from a geospatial sound model. The model predicts how much man-made noise raises ambient sound levels. Sound pressure levels for the continental United States were predicted using actual acoustical measurements combined with a multitude of explanatory variables such as location, climate, landcover, hydrology, wind speed, and proximity to noise sources (roads, railroads, and airports). The model predicts daytime impacts during midsummer. The impacts are determined by the difference between the *natural* ambient sounds levels (without the influence of human-made sound) and the *existing* sound levels (including human-caused sound) as predicted by the model. It should be noted that while the model excels at predicting acoustic conditions over large landscapes, it may not reflect recent localized changes such as new access roads or development. To better express the variation of impact across parks, a park-specific impact map was generated from the geospatial sound model. The park map for Overmountain Victory NHT is shown in Figure 1 below. The map was generated using 270 meter resolution, meaning that each pixel represents 270 square meters.

At Overmountain Victory NHT, the mean impact is predicted to be 7.1 decibels (dBA) (ranging from 0 decibels (dBA) in the least impacted areas to 10.0 decibels (dBA) in the most impacted areas.) That is, the average existing sound level (with the influence of man-made sounds) is predicted to be between 0 and 10 dBA above the natural ambient sound level.

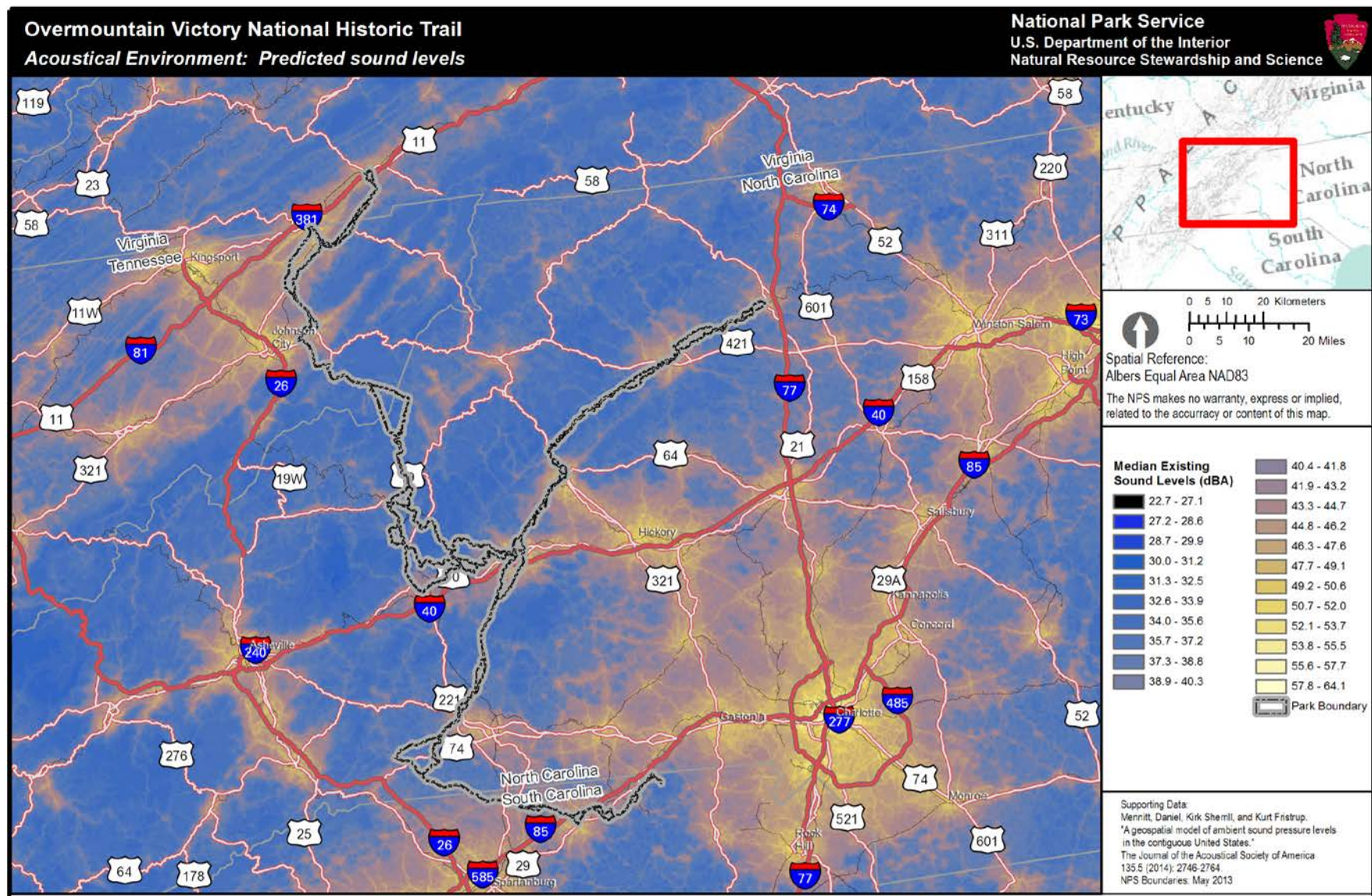
A one decibel change is not readily perceivable by the human ear, but any addition to this difference could begin to impact listening ability. An increase of 7.1 dBA (the mean for the entire trail section) would reduce listening area for wildlife and visitors by 80%. For example, if a predator can hear a potential prey animal in an area of 100 square feet in a setting with natural ambient sounds, that animal's ability to hear would be reduced to 20 square feet if the sound levels were increased by 7.1 dBA. Similar reduction would occur for visitors and their ability to hear natural sounds or interpretive programs. Keep in mind this is a mean impact across the park and impacts vary spatially throughout. For comparison, a 3 dBA reduction would decrease the listening area by 50% - or from 100 square feet to 50 square feet.

The park-specific map is a subset of the national model and shows median acoustic impact sound pressure levels for the park unit. An inset map is included in each park-specific map to provide a better sense of context, and major roads and highways are labeled for reference. Figures 3 and 4 show natural and existing sound pressure levels for the park unit, respectively.



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Figure 2. Median **natural** sound pressure levels for Overmountain Victory NHT. This park-specific natural sound level map is generated by version 3 of the geospatial model. The color scale indicates the decibel level that is predicted in the park based only on natural sound sources. Sound level is measured in A-weighted decibels, or dBA, with 270 meter resolution. Black and dark blue colors indicate low decibel levels while yellow or white colors indicate higher decibel levels. (note: each figure has different scale values)



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Figure 3. Median **existing** sound pressure levels for Overmountain Victory NHT. This park-specific existing sound level map is generated by version 3 of the geospatial model. The color scale indicates the decibel level that is predicted in the park based only on both human-caused and natural sound sources. Sound level is measured in A-weighted decibels, or dBA, with 270 meter resolution. Black and dark blue colors indicate low decibel levels while yellow or white colors indicate higher decibel levels. Sound levels in national parks can vary greatly, depending on location, topography, vegetation, biological activity, weather conditions and other factors. For example, the din of a typical suburban area fluctuates between 50 and 60 decibels (dBA), while the crater of Haleakala National Park is intensely quiet, with levels around 10 dBA. (note: each figure has different scale values)