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The Eco-sceptic

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Electric cars could be about to start getting noisy

Saving the planet might be the selfless motive for driving electric cars but most owners derive greatest pleasure from the silence of their vehicles. It's a pleasure soon to disappear as lawmakers in Europe and the US prepare rules to make them noisy. The argument is that pedestrians would be safer, especially those with impaired vision and hearing.

Although some figures from the US do suggest proportionately higher collision rates with electric vehicles, conclusive data is scarce – and I'm not surprised. Do people really navigate the urban jungle using only their ears? What about a bicycle's stealthy approach? Or indeed the latest diesel-engined vehicles, which, at low speeds, are very quiet.

Research into what we should hear from our electric cars is happening at the University of Warwick, where they don't want to just fit a speaker playing taped internal-combustion noises. But the replacements suggested – a variable-pitch hum or an incoming spaceship from a 1950s alien-invasion movie – are either dull or absurd. Personal choice would be more fun. What about a song? Fleetwood Mac's Formula One theme, for instance? It's not an option that I can see making its way through the bureaucracy.

Electric cars offer a rare opportunity to cut both chemical and noise pollution and we should embrace them. The sound made by internal-combustion engines is just an

unwelcome waste product. Some people may find it useful but then so did those who gathered up the dung from all our horse-drawn carriages to use as fertiliser. Insisting electric cars make a noise would be like passing a law in the early 20th century obliging drivers of the new-fangled 'motor vehicle' to deposit a dollop of well-rotted compost on the verge every 50 miles.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What sound should electric cars make?
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