Moab Utah is a lively tourist town normally filled with visitors from around the globe. Each year as the spring blooms, the town’s population goes from 8000 to nearly 100,000 people. They visit to see the world renown landscapes, participate in extreme sports, hike in two National Parks, and join in a variety of events focused on recreational activities. The town survives on the tourist industry and it has been starved with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each year during the week of Easter, Moab hosts the Moab Jeep Safari where thousands of 4x4 enthusiasts gather to not only test their abilities on some of the most extreme trails, but also connect with others, see the new gear and enjoy landscape. Due to COVID-19, the Moab Jeep Safari was cancelled for the first time in 53 years. Instead of hearing the sounds engines revving, horns honking and the commotion of the crowds, Moab was silent. Instead of seeing traffic jams compared those of large cities, there were empty streets. This unnerving silence left the locals feeling uneasy and frightened, as this silence was more from a post-apoplectic scene rather than a quiet rural town. The silence made it seem that we were alone, no longer connected to the wide world. The silence meant there was an absence of enjoyment, accomplishment and celebration. The silence took away the hopes for the next day, the next week, the next month and maybe more.

The absence of people and the silence changed Moab. Wildlife started to creep back into the town during the day, rather than wait for the quiet of the night. They too were disoriented by the unusual hush. Deer initiated traffic jams on Main Street, as seeing them brought a sense of peace and no one wanted to hurry them away. One had to guess if they just saw a dog rush through the playgrounds, or if it was a stealthy coyote exploring its new realm. Reports of bears visiting household yards became normal- they were the new menace instead of college youth on Spring Break. But the visiting wildlife were quiet, making that the biggest difference to the human visitors.

As we’ve established pre-cautions such as masks and social distancing, the people began to return. They discovered their recreational activities that took place outdoors was a natural way to socially distance. Moab is an ideal place for domestic travel, so the yearns to discover a new place could be met. Restaurants and hotels followed government mandates for occupancy levels, so the locals began to work again. Traffic returned to the Moab streets and with it the sounds of people, engines, horns carried through the breeze.

While we’ve begun our way back to some kind of normal, we’re all still apprehensive about the return of silence.