Wilderness and Community

At least since the time of Aldo Leopold, environmentalists have thought about the mission of environmentalism in terms of community. The objective, we often say, is to join "the land community," to create a new kind of culture in which community includes nonhuman as well as human elements.

This, however, raises some questions. Exactly what is a community? What are the essential elements of community? What rules—ecological, psychological, spiritual—pertain to community? And, given those rules, what kind of community do we actually have in mind when we talk about "the land community?"

In his book *The Labyrinth of Solitude* and a follow-up essay titled "Mexico and the United States," the Mexican writer Octavio Paz, who died last spring, offered some reflections on Mexican and North American societies that have helped me think about these questions.

Comparing Hispanic and Yankee societies, Paz suggests that a fundamental difference between them is the way they define themselves with respect to "others," which historically has meant the indigenous cultures encountered by Europeans in the course of their invasion of the continent. Here Paz comments that if the difference "could be summed up in two words, I would say that the Spanish attitude is inclusive and the English exclusive."

Thus, Paz notes that despite the terrible cruelties visited on the indigenous peoples of Mexico by the conquistadores, the culture that developed in Mexico provided, through baptism, "a place in the cosmos" that was denied the Indians by the puritan settlers in New England.

The result was, in Mexico, a mestizo culture that included everyone, despite great social inequality; and, in the United States, a society that ensured the political equality of its members, but that severely limited membership.

Summing up, Paz notes that Yankee culture is free and egalitarian, but exclusive—that is, "pure" or puritan. Mexican culture, on the other hand, is not free and not egalitarian, but inclusive—that is, it provides a psychological and spiritual basis for membership and communion, which, he notes is the opposite of purity.

Reflecting on this I am struck by the relevance of this characterization of Yankee culture to the environmentalism that has grown out of it. That, too, characteristically promotes an ideal of nature as free and equal, but it has tended to set it apart, preserving it, keeping it separate from the human community, and idealizing the pristine or pure—the wilderness "untrammelled," or, we may say, uncontaminated by humans.

Restoration is an interesting development here precisely because it challenges this commitment to the purity and separate-

ness of the rest of nature. The restored landscape may be of extremely high quality in a purely ecological sense, but it is never "pure." This is the basis for the critique of restoration offered by observers like Robert Elliot (in his new book *Faking Nature: the Ethics of Ecological Restoration*) and Eric Katz (*R&MN* 9(2): 90-96), and is also the topic of the exchange between Dwight Barry and Steve Windhager in this issue.

Elliot and Katz are right, of course. The restored ecosystem is never pure. But it may be a community. In fact, as I noted in a recent essay in this space, purity—or innocence—precludes community, and the loss of innocence is a condition for entry into community.

Thus, one great value of restoration may be precisely that it provides one way of breaking out of the bounds of the human community, allowing the mutual contamination of nature by culture and culture by nature on which human membership in the land community depends.

The critics of restoration promote wilderness at the expense of community. They say, in effect, that they don't want community everywhere; in some places, they want nature wild and free—free, that is, of human influence, pure, exclusive.

The question that emerges from this discussion is what happens when we have made the world a community through the work of restoration? What, then, happens to wilderness—nature pure and uncontaminated by the human?

The question is one I find I can't answer clearly. We may begin by pointing out that, whatever happens to wilderness, wilderness persists. We may also keep in mind that the cause of wilderness, defined as large areas remote from developed areas and relatively free of their influence, may well be supported by restoration, which not only provides a way of adding to and upgrading "natural" areas, but may also expand the constituency for conservation and—perhaps most important—provides an alternative to the consumptive use of wilderness as a way of contacting nature.

Beyond that, perhaps in the world of the future, made communal and sacred through activities such as restoration, real wilderness will be where it has always been, beyond the pale of the human community, in places not yet discovered and given form by human reflection. At one time this was, for some, the coast of Massachusetts. Today it is still to be found in remote mountain areas or at the bottom of the sea. Perhaps a hundred years from now it will lie in outer space or, again, where it always has, in the chaos that exists in the heart of human societies.

William R. Jordan III