Starting Up—A Reminiscence

Not long ago, in a conversation with a group of students at DePaul University, I made the observation that the idea of ecological restoration, exemplified here in the Midwest by the work being carried out by a small army of volunteers in Chicago's Forest Preserves, is a fairly new development. Not all that long ago, I pointed out, restoration was not only not taken seriously as a conservation strategy, it was not a topic of conversation among environmentalists—not, at any rate, in polite company.

Surprised, the students pressed me for details, which I supplied in the form of a few anecdotes.

I mentioned that, in 1977, when I started working at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum—which I later came to refer to as the Kitty Hawk of ecological restoration, only to be chided at one point by Eric Higgs for institutional chauvinism—the staff had very little awareness of the Arboretum's pioneering work in restoration, and even less sense that this form of land management might have important implications for conservation.

I recalled the occasion—it must have been about 1983—when standing in a cafeteria line at a conference somewhere in Michigan talking with my friend Keith Wendt, I blurted out something like, “Hey, I get it. Preservation is a bad idea; the key is really restoration.” And Keith turned to me in shocked dismay and said “Well, whatever. But don't say that out loud around here.”

I recalled being lectured by a guide at the Arboretum to the effect that restoration “isn't everything”—a notion I probably agreed with at the time, but have since cheerfully discarded.

And I recalled the beginning of this magazine, making a few remarks that I will expand on here, at the gracious invitation of Associate Editor Mary Ann Pels, on the occasion of the magazine's twenty-fifth volume and twenty-sixth anniversary.

The idea for this journal grew out of conversations Keith and I had during the late 1970s, trying to figure out what to make of the restoration effort, dating back to the 1930s, that was the Arboretum's most distinctive feature.

What did it all add up to? What good was a collection of artificial (that is, fake) natural ecosystems, when all you had to do was drive out in the country a few miles to see the real thing?

Part of the answer—the value of restoration as a model for landscape design—was clear, and had been reduced to practice by, among others, Professor Darrell Morrison, who had just a few years earlier established a program in natural landscaping in the UW's Department of Landscape Architecture Department, and who had even begun experimenting with native plants as part of a reclamation project at an iron mine in west-central Wisconsin.

Still, the question was an intriguing one. As gardener, I thought that it posed some interesting questions about the horticulture of all these native plants.

And there was more than that. I don't know about Keith, but I had in the back of my mind an image of the restorationist—field-crew foreman Gene Moran and his crew burning Curtis Prairie, profiled against this big, fake ecosystem, working hard to disappear into it, to disappear ecologically—that intrigued me.

Then—it must have been sometime in 1979—I was visiting a botanic garden somewhere, and someone on the staff took me out to a small patch of prairie they had been restoring. He told me about the experiments they had tried—scattering seed, scattering prairie hay, putting in transplants—and I thought, hey, they tried all that at the Arboretum 30 and 40 years ago. I don't suppose anyone ever published the results. But if others are working on projects like this, they ought to be in touch with each other.

So Keith and I started thinking about starting some kind of publication. At first what we had in mind was a peer-reviewed journal. But we didn't see how we could get the resources for a project like that. There was little interest for such a project at the Arboretum. And in any case, a peer-reviewed journal didn't seem appropriate for a discipline—if that was what it was—that was still so seat-of-the-pants, so practitioner-driven, so informal, and, for that matter, so unaware of itself as dealing with distinctive problems or offering a new approach to natural-area conservation.

We were still thinking this over when one day two young men named Rex Boner and Mark Heitlinger

dropped in at the Arboretum and we got into a conversation. Both worked for the Midwest region of The Nature Conservancy—Rex as Director of land stewardship, and Mark as Director of prairie management. They were, naturally, familiar with the current thinking and practice regarding land management for TNC, and were doing a good deal of thinking about land management strategies, the idea of preservation, the role of management, including restoration, and so forth.

We told them about the thinking we had been doing about restoration, and at some point we mentioned our idea of starting a publication of some kind dealing specifically with restoration.

Rex and Mark thought that sounded like an interesting idea. But, like us, they didn't think a peer-reviewed journal was what was called for. Instead, they mentioned another publication they were familiar with (I can't recall what it was) that published short pieces—notes—by practitioners.

The idea was, make it short, straightforward, informal, information-rich, easy to write and easy to read, in keeping with the state of the profession, such as it was. I suppose if the conversation had taken place 20 years later we would have just sat down and started a blog. But this was 1979 or thereabouts, and it sounded like a good model, so we pushed it, as an occasional publication that we would call "Restoration & Management Notes"—an occasion, as it turned out, for me to add the ampersand to my touch-typing repertory.

We convinced Katherine Bradley, the Arboretum Director, that it wouldn't cost much to put out an issue or two, and at least it would do no harm to try. She agreed, though in a vague sort of way, and we set out to round up material for a first issue.

That turned out to be great fun. We hadn't thought about it, but when you start a publication it's nice to have an organization of some kind to provide a ready-made constituency, both to write stuff for the publication and then to read it when it comes out. Of course we didn't have that, so we spent a lot of time on the phone solicit-

ing "content." What made this interesting was that we didn't have much of a list to start with, and most of the people we talked with had no idea that what they were doing belonged in our little publication.

We'd call someone we'd heard about from someone else and ask if they'd like to write a note for our new publication about ecological restoration, and they'd say, "Well I don't know anything about that." And we'd say, "Well your friend George over in the next county says that you are doing such and such with your prairie or your wetland." Then they would say that's true. And we'd say, "Well that's what we mean by restoration!" Then, more often than not, he or she would write a note for the journal.

This gave us the feeling we were really accomplishing something, just in getting the word out, so to speak, and starting a conversation.

Eventually, we had enough items to make an issue. We sent it off, typed-up on paper of course, and got it printed. I remember bringing a copy of the first issue in to Katherine Bradley's office to show her. Keith and I hadn't discussed the project with her much after we started working on it, and as I placed it on her desk I suddenly realized that what I was showing her was a lot more ambitious—and more expensive—than what she had thought we were up to, since at one point she had mentioned something about a mimeographed publication, and ours was printed and saddle stitched—a real magazine.

But she didn't say anything, and paid the bill for the printer. And we had several of the Arboretum volunteers come out and help us put mailing labels on that first issue, which we mailed free to a few hundred people, just inviting them to subscribe.

Fortunately, quite a few did, and that turned out to be the beginning of one of the most delightful adventures I have yet to be involved in.

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