Guest Editorial

The Anti-Management Revolt

Ecological management is not necessarily anthropocentric or exploitative. Based on the idea of restoration, it becomes the practice of the land ethic.

Recently in the state of Massachusetts a dispute, minor in the tides of history but revelatory of the kinds of problems environmental managers are facing today, has been raging. The deer population at Crane Reservation, one of the state's largest parks, has edged up beyond the carrying capacity of the land, and there are demands by some sportsmen that they be allowed to harvest the excess. A Cornell wildlife specialist has rejected their solution for his own: a professional culling of the herd by state officials. But now emerging on the scene is still a third group, self-designated defenders of the animals, who insist that the deer be allowed to die a "natural" death, by starvation and disease rather than by somebody's gun. Nature will take care of the mess in her own way, the defenders argue, and though not a pleasant way, it will be a better one than either that of the sportsmen or the experts. Since no one is seriously proposing to truck in food for the deer, as we do for the grim refugee camps of Ethiopia, death is the only realistic remedy. The issue is, death by what agency? Not that of any human manager, say many environmentalists.

Anyone who has a management program to propose today can expect a similar suspiciousness, if not outright hostility, from many environmentalists variously called defenders or preservationists. The suspicion has been gathering momentum for at least a century, and today it pervades the major lay conservation organizations. Though some forms of intervention in nature remain acceptable (and anyone who eats or drives or reads must perforce depend upon many kinds of intensive interference in nature), the idea of management in general is on the defensive in environmentalist circles. Why is this, and what are land managers to do about it?

At the root of the preservationist revolt is concern about the great damage done to the nonhuman world by a runaway, often arrogant industrialism, which acknowledges no limits on its drive to dominate and manage. Where that industrialism is most virulent and unchecked, where a fanatic devotion to capitalistic profit pushes and legitimizes it, as in the United States, the preservationist revolt has become especially outspoken and, some would say, doctrinaire. Animated by a growing disillusion with the entire program of human domination over the earth, the American environmental movement has had a worldwide impact—and that is fitting, given the even greater impact Ameri-

can businessmen and engineers have had on the biosphere and on other cultures. One fierceness breeds another, one unswerving commitment gives rise to a rival. And whether one likes the prospect or not, there is probably no other means by which cultural attitudes can be substantially changed by human will at this point than by a sustained, often doctrinaire, radical, almost religiously zealous challenge by preservationists.

Recall how our current economic institutions, with their often disastrous environmental consequences, got the upper hand originally. They came in on a wave of revulsion toward all forms of human management of the economy (a revulsion most compellingly expressed by the eighteenth-century economist Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*). A rising class of merchants and manufacturers, along with many economists, demanded that nature be allowed to take its course—that is, they insisted on a policy of laissez-faire. Government did not know enough to make sound managerial decisions, they complained, and it would inevitably play favorites, do things inefficiently, and reduce productivity. In a free market economy, on the other hand, a million private, individual decisions would create a perfect order, self-equilibrating and infinitely expansive. Some people might lose out in that free market world, might become desperately poor or even die, but the fittest would survive. We bought that argument two hundred years ago, and we are still buying it today in the United States. As a consequence, we have transformed much of the earth into a heavily managed assembly line for mass-producing commodities.

Now the preservationists have almost completely reversed those arguments. They want less management of the earth but more of the economy. Instead of remaking nature, they argue, it is time to remake ourselves and our institutions by learning restraint, controlling our numbers, our wants, and our waste. They talk about respecting the balance of nature with the same awe and reverence that entrepreneurs show in discussing the free market. What is natural is good, they say, even if, as in the case of the Crane Reserve deer herd, it has the stench of death and suffering about it; but of course what is natural for preservationists is not to be found in industrial capitalism. Slowly, by fits and starts, they have come to challenge the ruling economic institutions of our time, though commonly without a clear idea of a substitute; ironically, however, they do so in the very language that those institutions themselves once used to gain acceptability. Freedom from interference, liberation from planners, the sanctity of the natural order are phrases used by both sides, though the preservationists and the free market advocates give them a different meaning. No wonder the emotions run so high, and the conflict has

become so divisive. Fundamental issues are at stake, and key cultural values are up for grabs.

Anyone coming forth with a program of restoration management, no matter how small or obscure an area, may expect to be pressured by one side or the other. Capitalists want such land management to be clearly subservient to profit and economic growth—otherwise spare us the expense. The preservationists, in contrast, tolerate management in most cases only if it is self-liquidating—if it is necessary to save some natural area or to enable them eventually to operate free of human manipulation. From this point of view, management that is perpetual is a form of domination, and the preservationists' goal is to reduce, not continue or extend domination over nature.

What this situation requires is the utmost clarity on the part of environmental managers as to what their goals are. Do they change nature to increase economic productivity? Or are they interested in improving the scenery, showing off their technical virtuosity, satisfying their scientific curiosity, or finding employment? If any of these, then preservationists are going to raise objections, maybe angrily. But if the goal of management is to define and reestablish some semblance of a natural order, then preservationists will probably be supportive—and it will be the economists who turn hostile. In any case, managers are going to have to ex-

plain their mission clearly. They are required, at the very least, to be thoughtful about their ends and to justify their means in this time of conflict and suspicion.

Also required of land managers is a new ideal of management, one based on a sense of community with nature rather than on human domination. If in the past management has been mainly a means to power and profit, there is no reason for it to remain so; it might become a strategy for harmonizing the needs of all the species that make up the ecological order. In other words, it might be the practice of an ethic—the land ethic. Restoration management, in particular, has the potential of becoming that practice. In seeking to renew disturbed natural communities, it advocates using human intelligence as well as following ecological processes. As it develops it may help show us how to intervene in the landscape in an ethical way so that both people and the rest of nature can co-exist.

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