Restoration as Realization

Recently restorationists have been thinking and talking a great deal about the problem of defining standards for restoration projects. A major effort is underway to define standards for wetland restoration, for example. And at its first annual conference, in Oakland last January, the Society for Ecological Restoration and Management sponsored a special symposium on standards by way of kicking off a program expected to result in a set of written guidelines applicable to a wide range of North American ecological communities.

This is a subject that emerges naturally from the act—or the promise—of restoration. Since the very term “restoration” means putting something back the way it was, when you undertake a restoration project you are hoping—or promising—to do just that—to bring a bit of landscape back into the condition it was in at some time, or during some period, in the past.

And the question—naturally—is, can you do that?

The discussion of this matter has concentrated, quite understandably, on the question of accuracy. Just how accurate will the replica be? How faithful to the original? And what features of the community, the ecosystem or the landscape provide the best indicators for assessing the accuracy of a restoration project?

In general, the assumption has been that since perfect replication is not only difficult, but perhaps strictly impossible (because we never know all the details, and because even if we did we could never hope to replicate them down to the last mycorrhizal hypha and the most obscure nutrient cycling system), that the restored or artificial system will always be inferior to the original, “natural” system.

Behind this question of technical accuracy, however, is another, deeper question, which has to do with the whole nature of the restoration enterprise and the ultimate, or intrinsic value of its product.

Here, I think, there is a tendency to suppose that, however successful the restorationist may be in a purely technical sense, however accurately the resulting system reproduces the patterns and processes of the “natural” system, the restored system is intrinsically inferior to the original simply because it is restored.

In other words, however *accurate* it may be, the restored community can never be *authentic*. It is not just technically inferior, it is somehow less *real*.

I know this was my own original reaction to the restored communities at the UW Arboretum. Walking on Curtis Prairie, or in Wingra Woods that first year, thinking of their history (the early planning by the CCC, the years of ongoing restoration and deliberate maintenance since), I really did feel they were somehow not just defective, but actually less real than the original communities they were intended to represent. I would think about the nature writers I had read—Thoreau in particular—and his

celebration of wilderness and the “natural,” and I would wonder whether anyone would ever write a poem about a restored forest or an artificial prairie.

Since then, however, I have come to see this all quite differently. I see the artificial system as defective—yes, at least usually—but not as less real. In fact, I now see it as *more* real in the precise sense that it is more fully “realized,” specifically through our involvement in its ecology.

Restoration, as I see it now, is essentially a deliberate attempt to compensate for our influence on the system. In order to do this successfully, however, it is necessary to understand the precise nature of our influence on the system. And this in turn implies a deeper and more detailed understanding of the system itself.

Ultimately, we can undo influence only insofar as we understand it. And so by committing ourselves to this continual doing and undoing—this cycle of influence and compensation—we commit ourselves to an ever deeper and more precise understanding of the system itself.

One way of saying this is that, in being restored, in struggling toward restoration in a new setting, the ecological community actually becomes—through our involvement—more aware of itself, more fully realized, and in this sense more real.

And this emerging “realization” of the system obviously has profound implications both for the system itself and for our relationship with it.

Basically, what we are seeing here is a radical evolutionary metamorphosis—the transcription of genetic information from the classic Darwinian/Mendelian form into the mental and cultural form—from a chemical-based (DNA) system to an electronic (mental) system of information storage, transmission and retrieval.

In this way, the classic system is, as it were, caught up in the spiral of cultural evolution and acquires an alternative mode of reproduction, one that is capable, if not of handling it to perfection, at least of making it compatible with the speeded-up pace of cultural evolution.

All this is a bit like transferring your old, paper records onto computer disks. The one may not adequately substitute for the other. In fact, our electronic system is in a sense primitive and rudimentary, and obviously still far from adequate to handle the original, “natural” system in all its complexity and subtlety.

Nevertheless, the transcription is a necessary step in the survival of the classic communities in any landscape dominated by the electronic, cultural mode of evolution. The point, as with the transcription from paper into computer form, is not necessarily to change, to tinker, but just to bring the material along, to preserve it under a new dispensation operating in a new mode.

This, I think, needs to be recognized and celebrated. For all their defects, our restored communities are the Walden Ponds and Yosemite of a new sensibility, and if we have as yet no books about them, no poems and no hymns of praise, it is only because they have not yet found their Thoreaus and their John Muirs.

William R. Jordan III