Editorial

The Pastoral Experiment

Though I vividly recall reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*—twice, in fact, in high school and in college— and even being impressed by its nature and landscape imagery (remember the eery garden of ashes, the haunting green light at the end of the pier, and the vision of presettlement Long Island?), I only recently connected it with the theme of ecological restoration.

This insight came—alas—not from my own deeply insightful rereading of this American classic from the vantage point of my work with restorationists, but from MIT literary critic Leo Marx. In *The Machine in the Garden*, his classic discussion of the pastoral ideal in American literature, Marx explores how American writers have developed the theme of pastoral—the vision of culture in harmony with a benign and idyllic nature that was more or less invented by the Roman poet Virgil.

Beginning with "The Tempest," which is the only one of Shakespeare's plays set in the New World, and which explores the role and fate of people in an imagined, Edenic landscape, Marx traces the development of this theme through a surprising succession of American writers, many of whom are not generally included in the canon of nature or environmental writers: Washington Irving, Thomas Jefferson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mark Twain—and finally Fitzgerald. Disparate as these authors are, they share, Marx argues, a vision of America, the New World, imagined as Eden or Arcadia—a bright, unspoiled landscape where nature and culture might exist in harmony.

Hence Ishmael, the narrator in Melville's *Moby Dick*, goes to sea seeking renewal through contact with wilderness at a time when he feels the wild places on land have vanished, but eventually transcends sentimental pastoralism to achieve a truer sense of nature that comprehends culture and technology. And so, too, Twain's Huckleberry Finn, through the Arcadian experience of life on a raft on the Mississippi River, achieves a sense of the tragic limits of the Arcadian dream, yet decides in the end to "light out for the Territory," in pursuit of the receding American Arcadia of the frontier.

A half-century later, Marx locates the same theme among the high-living fashionable society of the New York and Long Island of the Roaring Twenties. The mysterious Jay Gatsby, he suggests, is ultimately another of these seekers after a simpler, more "natural" time, represented in the novel by the relatively unspoiled Midwestern landscape of his boyhood. Narrator Nick Carraway shares Gatsby's pastoral vision, but—like both Ishmael and Huck at the end of their adventures—his is a more complex vision—one in which the fantasy of nature in harmony is balanced by a sense of the fearful in nature and the element of human alienation from it. In the end Nick, like Huck, plans a return to Arcadia—in his case the diminished frontier of the Midwest.

The ending is never satisfactory, Marx writes, because the old symbols of reconciliation between nature and culture are obsolete. "To change the situation," he writes, "we require new symbols of possibility, and although the creation of these symbols is in some measure the responsibility of artists, it is in greater measure the responsibility of society."

The responsibility of society—including ecological restorationists. For it is just here, I think, that Marx's interpretation of the theme of pastoral suggests a vital cultural mission for restoration as a new symbol—or, better theater or proving ground—for the old vision of Arcadia. Surely the restoration of nature is, in some sense, a search for a vanished Eden; and so it is the adventure of Ishmael, of Huck, and of Nick and Gatsby. What these fictional characters did figuratively, the restorationist attempts to do literally, actually trying to reduce the Arcadian ideal to practice—not only to bring nature back, but to reinhabit it through the very act of restoration, exploring the old Arcadian middle landscape, but in a new way.

To the extent this is true restoration, regarded as a performing art—as an expressive act as well as an effective process—has a key role to play in resolving what Marx calls the "root conflict of our culture."

In assuming this role, we should keep in mind the pattern suggested by the fictional experience Marx describes. Toward the end of *Gatsby*, there is a famous passage that is especially relevant. Left alone at the end of the summer, brooding over Long Island Sound at night, Nick imagines the island as it once was: ". . .the inessential houses melted away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world."

Compare this with the restorationist's vision—the vision of the oak savannas, for example, that Steve Packard described in his account of his restoration work, which "compelled us to want to see what we had so often read of, something that no longer existed anywhere—the rich grassland running up to, and under, and through the oaks. A prairie with trees." (R&MN 6, p. 14).

The fascinating thing, of course, is what happens when one actually tries the experiment. It never turns out quite as expected. The Territory is gone, or compromised. The Midwest of Marquette and Joliet has become the Gopher Prairie of Sinclair Lewis. And the imagined "prairie with trees" turns out to be something quite new and unexpected. So the experiment yields both knowledge and wisdom. One discovery is history. Both Nick and Gatsby share the Arcadian vision, Marx argues, but the difference between the sentimental pastoralism of Gatsby (with its tragic consequences) and Nick's more complex pastoralism is that, while Nick acknowledges the reality of history, Gatsby does not, but believes the past may readily be undone, and all harm remedied.

"I'm going to fix everything," he says at one point. He is referring to the relationship between two friends, but the remark might stand for the naive idea of ecological restoration—the idea that injury is easily undone, "mitigation" merely a technical matter of repair and good intentions.

Again, the experience of restoration teaches the folly of this. Restoration is, in fact, nothing less than an experiment in the importance of history. By attempting to reverse change, the restorationist learns to discriminate change that can be reversed from change that cannot. The resulting wisdom is a crucial component of our emerging relationship with the rest of nature.

The important thing is to pursue our experiment in pastoral hopefully in the expectation of finding every element of harmony we can in the relationship between ourselves and the rest of nature, rediscovering old harmonies and, perhaps discovering some new ones.

At the same time, let's keep the darker side, the intransigent tragic element in mind. Let's hope for progress but not perfection—be Ishmael and Huck and Nick, not Gatsby.

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With this issue, R&MN marks the end of its first decade of publication. It has been just ten years this July since we unloaded the first, thin issue of the journal from a van and mailed it out—free—to a thousand or so likely subscribers.

Since then, the enterprise has prospered. We have gone from "occasional" to twice-yearly, and are considering moving to quarterly publication. We have more pages, and those pages are filled with news from a vigorous, rapidly growing young discipline. Circulation, aided by the creation three years ago of the Society for Ecological Restoration, is well over 2,000 and is growing healthily. For a number of years, R&MN has been paying its own production costs. This past year it began paying editorial costs as well. And since Dave Egan joined the staff two years ago we have for the first time had regular help with the work of getting the journal together.

All this bodes well for the future of the publication and—we think—for the science and art of restoration. Indeed, progress so far has only made everyone involved more keenly aware of the need for more effort, including more and better publications, if the discipline is to achieve its promise as a way of conserving—and communing with—the natural world.

Even as this anniversary issue goes to press, SER's Editorial Advisory Committee is considering plans for improvements in the journal, and for the development of a comprehensive publication and communications program for the restoration community.

As this planning proceeds, keep in mind that your ideas are welcome. The planners hope to hear from you. You may even be contacted directly—but if not, don't hesitate to contact the R&MN office in Madison (608–262–1491 or Advisory Committee Chair Glenn Hughes (DuBois, PA; 814-375-4700).

And look forward to exciting developments ahead.

In the meantime, congratulations to all of us.

Onward and upward!

William R. Jordan III

Guest Editorial

Restoring and Re-storying the Landscape

by Gary Paul Nabhan

Find me the first vermillion flycatcher that sallies out from the canopies of newly-leafed cottonwoods and willows to pick off recently-hatched insects, and I will warble with delight: spring has come once again to the Sonoran Desert. "*Tut-tut tiddly-zing*," and it flutters out from a catkin-laden branch, hovers like a butterfly, dives to spear its prey, then whips back to the same branch. Such a sight, though, cannot be seen everywhere across the desert floor. It is restricted to the ribbon-like riparian corridors that roll out of the volcanic and granitic ranges to meander across otherwise dry basins. The lushness of greenery on a gallery forest floodplain, splotched with the reds, yellows and oranges of warblers, orioles, tanagers and flycatchers, is a sight for the sore eyes of one used to the greys and drab, subdued greens of a desert winter.

Down on the Mexican side of the desert, the first flush of foliage on cottonwoods and willows has added significance. It means, to a Sonoran floodplain farmer, that the new cuttings for his living hedgerow have taken root. Following the torrential floods brought by the summer monsoons and late fall El Nino downpours, the untamed river shifted course and meandered across his field edge, leaving his fields a mess. A few years before, he had planted a hedgerow along the riverbanks, weaving brush between the saplings to slow the force of any floods that spilled over the banks into his fields. Last year's flood did surge high, and uprooted a few of the willows in his line of defense. So in January he trimmed branches from the survivors to plant as poles a meter deep above the newly-formed bank at his field's edge. By late February they had rooted and soon after began to leaf out. Now, in mid-March, he sees insectivorous birds arriving and perching in the new growth, then foraging over his fields for bugs, which he sees as pests. The renewal he beholds gives him a feeling of fulfillment known to many of us who labor with plants and animals. It is a feeling that our well-placed efforts can contribute to the diversity within our surroundings, restoring habitat rather than further degrading it.

If you walk with an elderly Sonoran farmer out among the curvilinear hedgerows on the floodplain near his village, each row prompts a story of a flood, and how people healed the scars it left and planted more protective trees in their stead. He can rattle off the years of the great floods that have come within his own lifespan, and sometimes those since his father's time: 1887, 1890, 1905, 1914, 1915, 1961, 1977 and 1983. He can point to trees that

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