Editorial

Otro Mundo

Restoration, Columbus, and the Search for Eden

On August 17, 1498, making his way west and north from the coast of South America near Trinidad, outbound on what was to prove a disastrous third voyage to the Indies, Christopher Columbus confided to his journal what biographer Samuel Eliot Morison describes as "an astonishing deduction."

Reflecting on "his Polaris observations on the ocean crossing,. . .the freshwater currents of the Gulf of Paria, the vegetation he had encountered there and the comparatively mild temperature for a place so near the equator," he concluded that the land he had been skirting for the previous two weeks was none other than the Garden of Eden!

"He says, according to the surviving transcription of his record, that not finding any islands now assures him that that land whence he came is a great continent where is located the Terrestrial Paradise, 'because all men say that it's at the end of the Orient, and that's where we are'. . ." (Morison, Admiral of the Ocean Sea, p. 556).

While apparently no one took this seriously, at least in a literal way, Europeans have been prone, from the first moment of contact, to regard this "Other World"—the phrase is Columbus' own—as a kind of Paradise, a landscape unspoiled by history and occupied by an innocent, prelapsarian people.

Much of the subsequent history of the Americas—including the waves of immigration, the settlement, the associated despoliation of indigenous landscapes and indigenous peoples, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution, and to some extent even the industrialization of the 19th century, may be seen as consequences of that persistent imagining of this "other" green world as a literal embodiment of the mythic Paradise.

So may environmentalism, including preservation, with its dream of unspoiled nature, deliberately protected from corrupting human influence—and now restoration, with its vision of Paradise lost and then laboriously regained.

Both, it seems to me, derive some of their energy from that perennial quest. Both are motivated at least in part by a vision of an unspoiled land where nature and culture co-exist in harmony. And yet, at the same time, there are important differences between these two ways of thinking, these two strategies for achieving harmony with nature.

Like preservation, restoration is clearly a chapter in the story of our search for Eden. But while the preservationist in us continues to believe, with Columbus, that Eden actually exists, and is constantly searching for it somewhere beyond the horizon—in South America and the Indies, and then in Massachusetts and Virginia, and in Kentucky, Colorado and Yosemite—the restorationist has turned to a different task—the task not of finding an existing Eden, but of actually making it out of raw materials in a landscape compromised by history.

This may seem a thankless task, until we recall that Eden never was a real place. Rather it was a product of the human imagination—an invention. This being the case, it only makes sense that the way to attain Eden is not to search for it, but to make it.

This is the work of the restorationist—to realize the vision, to reduce the idea to practice, to make a working model—not a reproduction, but a prototype of Paradise.

This effort will not fully succeed—the quest for Eden and harmony with nature never does. But just as surely it will not altogether fail. Such experiments always yield something—even if it is only a gain in wisdom at the cost of our dreams; perhaps this is why we hold back, reluctant to try an experiment that challenges one of our most cherished fantasies.

Fantasies, however, can be destructive—and this is as true in the area of environmental management as anywhere. Here the illusion of America as an unspoiled land occupied by innocent people nurtured an environmental ethos that idealized wilderness, effectively precluded human citizenship in the land community, overlooked the achievements of pre-Columbian peoples as land managers, and led to the passive destruction of many ecosystems through their protection from human influences such as fire, hunting and other forms of ecosystem management.

As the brief history of restoration already shows, it is precisely by trying to re-create these ecosystems that we rediscover these influences and regain our identity as active members of the land community.

This not only gives us a little bit of the Garden. It gives us a place in it—something we are unlikely to stumble upon anywhere out there in the landscape, whether just beyond the hills of the Venezuelan coast, or in Antarctica.

1992 is, of course, the quincentennial of the first voyage of Columbus to the New World. Much is being said and written about this epochal event, much of it of a despairing and guilt-ridden nature. While we in no way make light of the sometimes tragic consequences of the encounter of the Old World with the New, we believe that tragedy is inseparable from life, and that the real challenge is not to separate ourselves from it, but to find ways of comprehending it and then doing what we can to compensate for it.

This, of course, is what the business of ecological restoration is all about. Convinced that the restoration community has a unique contribution to make, we are devoting the entire lead section of this issue of R&MN to articles by various restorationists on the Quincentennial and its relation to their work. The result is an overview of our community's accomplishments and visions for restoring pre-contact landscapes.

Bringing all this together has been an exhilarating experience. We hope you enjoy reading it as much as we have enjoyed putting it together.

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