

# The Prairie and the Pangolin

A fundamental question that hovers over the restoration enterprise is the question of the nature of the restored ecosystem—not just how accurate it is ecologically, but also what kind of thing it is: natural or artificial, real or fake, sacred or profane?

This question may seem marginal or merely “philosophical.” But it is important in a very practical way because the way we answer it will determine to a considerable extent the spirit in which we carry out our work, which in turn will determine what kinds of value we derive from it and how far we can go with it, both as individuals and as a society.

One answer to this question has recently been developed in great detail by the Australian philosopher Robert Elliot. In a book titled *Faking Nature: The Ethics of Environmental Restoration*, reviewed in this issue by University of North Texas environmental philosopher Eugene Hargrove, Elliot argues that, though restoration is worthy work, and may even be a responsibility in some situations, the resulting ecosystem is a fundamentally different kind of thing than the “original”—not nature, but nature compromised by culture and human intentionality.

The problem Elliot is posing is essentially the problem of categories. It is hard to think clearly about a restored ecosystem because it doesn't fit neatly into either of two categories—“nature” or “culture”—that Westerners have used for at least two and a half millennia to make sense of the world. Being neither altogether natural nor altogether artificial, the restored prairie, for example, mixes the categories and violates them. This challenges our very idea of the world, and this is a source of profound, existential ambivalence.

There are several ways to respond to this. One is to insist, as Elliot does, on the preservation of the categories. But to do this is to make too much of the categories, which, after all, are ultimately “constructed” of the mind that separate us from the world in its uncategorized wholeness even as they connect us with it by enabling us to make sense of it. This being the case, to insist on the purity of categories is ultimately to preclude the deepest kinds of relationship with the world, those that transcend the categories and violate them.

A second response to the ambiguity that arises from the violation of categories is to suggest that we simply get rid of them, or replace the ones we have with others. Environmentalists often talk, for example, as though environmental problems are rooted in the Western practice of thinking in terms of “nature” and “culture” as distinct categories, and that the first step toward solving these problems would be to get rid of them.

Other societies, they argue, don't think in terms of “nature” and “culture” as fundamental categories. But, even if this is true,

humans everywhere do think in categories, one of the most fundamental of which is “self” and “not-self” or “other.” So, if they don't draw the line in one place they draw it in another. And wherever the lines are drawn they create a metaphysical fault line that is always a source of tension and ambiguity.

The problem of the categories is unavoidable quite simply because the world does not exist in categories, yet we have to construct categories in order to make sense of the world—in fact, in order to survive in it.

To put this another way, the violation of categories, though troubling, is actually a point of contact with the real. Thus the most fruitful way of responding to it is not to deny or repress it, or to try to avoid it by refashioning categories or borrowing categories from other cultures, but to take advantage of it as an occasion for access to the real and the sacred.

In her classic book, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, the British anthropologist Mary Douglas explores the phenomenon of conceptual categories and the role they play in thought and in the construction of a relationship with the world. She describes what is essentially a metaphysics of dirt—that is, of matter out of place, objects or actions that violate categories in a way that forces us to confront the limitations of those categories.

For example, Douglas describes the role of the pangolin, or scaly anteater, in the theology and rituals of the Lele people of Africa. The pangolin, she writes, is an anomalous creature that in many ways violates the categories of Lele thought. It is, for example, scaly like a fish yet climbs trees, lays eggs yet suckles its young, and, most important, bears young one at a time, a trait the Lele regard as peculiar to humans.

Thus, the Lele see the pangolin as a fearful creature—a kind of “benign monster” that “in its own existence combines all the elements which Lele culture keeps apart.” Yet, Douglas writes, “instead of being abhorred and utterly anomalous, the pangolin is eaten in solemn ceremony” in which initiates into the tribe are invited to “turn round and confront the categories on which their whole surrounding culture has been built up and to recognize them for the fictive, man-made, arbitrary creations that they are.”

So at the very climax of his initiation into Lele society, a young man is led up to and forced to confront the inadequacy of the basic categories of thought by which his society interprets the world. How many graduate students in our universities, with their devotion to the categories of discipline and status, can claim the same experience?

The relevance of all this to the act of ecological restoration is obvious. The restored prairie is for the modern Westerner what

the pangolin is for the Lele—an object that violates fundamental categories, and that for this very reason provides an occasion for breaking through to an apprehension of the reality behind the categories—in this case of “nature” and “culture,” or, for that matter, “wilderness” and “civilization.”

To resist this is to preclude the deepest contact with the real and the experience of the sacred. And this is perhaps the most important reason for rejecting the preservation of the categories. So long as we adopt this purist conception of our work, proceed-

ing apologetically, timidly preserving the categories rather than pushing through them to the reality beyond, we deny ourselves access to the deepest communion with it.

That communion is perhaps the greatest gift the restorationist has to offer humanity and nature itself. But it can be achieved only by confronting the ambiguity implicit in our work, not by denying or avoiding it.

*William R. Jordan III*