

## Living in the Present, Searching for the Past, Planning for the Future

It occurred to me the other day that while I am living in the present, I find myself curiously focused on the past while at the same time planning for the future. If you think about it, ecological restoration requires us to live simultaneously in three temporal worlds. It also arguably requires us to link these three temporal worlds on multidimensional scales, including form, function, and space.

I just finished reading Charles C. Mann's *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, (review published in *ER* 24(3):217–218). While the book confirmed my limited understanding of what the Americas were like pre-European settlement, it also rocked my somewhat naïve perceptions as well. It is safe to say that the landscapes of most of North America, Mesoamerica and wide expanses of South America, including the Amazon rainforest, have been molded by people for thousands of years. In many areas native people manipulated large expanses of the landscape, through fire, farming and agro-forestry, forever changing the ecological form and function of the land.

While this notion is not new to restoration ecologists, the potential extent of landscape modifications combined with the age of migration and settlement of its earliest peoples should keep us questioning our notions regarding ecological fidelity for the Americas—something that the Old World has contemplated for centuries. With tools like carbon dating, pollen core analysis and dendrochronology, we can continue to expand our knowledge and understanding of the links between past ecological processes, on-going cultural modifications and current landscape patterns.

“The disadvantage of men not knowing the past is that they do not know the present,” wrote G.K. Chesterton, an influential English writer of the early 20th century. How true for ecological restoration. How can we expect

to put current landscape patterns, ecological processes, and cultural activities into context if we have no knowledge of the past? Over the years, I have come to appreciate the importance of the “story of place,” and how it can inform ecological restoration strategies. For me, the story of place not only includes an exploration of geological and biological processes, but equally important an exploration of cultural and spiritual development, all within the context of present realities.

Climate change, species extinction, invasive species proliferation, human overpopulation, habitat loss, and apathy, to name a few, provide formidable challenges to ecological restoration. What will be the story of place in 50, 100 or even 1,000 years? We don't have to have all of the answers, or even most of them, but we do have a responsibility to set a trajectory for restoration that is resilient to foreseeable perturbations—one that is hopefully in a dynamic equilibrium.

Alex Haley, the American writer best known perhaps for his book *Roots, The Saga of an American Family*, had this to say about the past: “Unless we learn from history, we are destined to repeat it. This is no longer merely an academic exercise, but may contain our world's fate and our destiny.” The beauty of ecological restoration is that it is not merely an academic exercise but an application informed by our dynamic understandings of the past, present, and future.

How can we use our knowledge of the past to effect changes in the present that will restore the future? Join one of our list-serves or e-mail us at [www.info@ser.org](mailto:www.info@ser.org), and let us know what you think.

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