Editorial

Restoring the Restorationist

The subject of ecological restoration has recently begun to enter the mainstream of environmental thinking in a serious way, and one result has been a great deal of discussion about the role it might play—or ought to play—in conservation.

So far, this discussion has dealt mainly with the products of restoration—restored communities or ecosystems—and their ecological quality, authenticity and cost. In other words, we hear a great deal of talk about the effect of restoration on the landscape, but we hear next to nothing about the effect of restoration on the restorationist and on his or her relationship with the system being restored, with the landscape, or with nature generally.

Obviously, questions of quality and authenticity are vitally important matters. Restoration would be meaningless without reference to the historic landscape and without an explicit commitment to reproduce, or at least to imitate it.

In my view, however, there is a danger that restoration will wind up being discussed and criticized and finally judged only in these terms.

I think this would be unfortunate because I believe that the great thing about restoration—perhaps the most important thing it has to contribute to environmentalism—is *not* its products, crucial as they are, but a whole process that offers a way of achieving and acting out a healthy, constructive, mutually beneficial relationship between ourselves and the rest of nature.

This is something environmental thinkers have been calling for since the time of Thoreau and Marsh—not just the preservation of nature, but some way of achieving a vital, satisfying *relationship* with it.

Restoration may not be the whole answer to this riddle. But it is at least a way of acting out a positive relationship with the natural world in a practical manner and in a way that is accessible to people in any phase of cultural evolution.

To see what I mean, consider just what restoration has to offer as a strategy or technique for establishing a healthy relationship with nature.

First of all, to have a relationship with anything, you need the thing itself. Restoration gives us that: its objective, at least, is the "natural" biotic community, and sometimes it comes reasonably close to achieving this. Furthermore—and this is vitally important, since what we are taking about here is *relationships*—it offers a way of doing this anywhere, including densely populated areas such as cities.

Secondly, restoration provides a way of participating actively in the ecology of the community. The restorationist may be a technician or a scientist or a healer—or whatever. But she is also, quite literally, a member of the community and—like the other animals and plants that make it up—a participant in its ecology.

This is something you don't get to quite the same extent in any other way that I can think of—this intricate transaction of business in and within the community, this sharing of responsibilities and concerns, this exchange of goods and services. What it amounts to is taking the notion of being a citizen of the land community seriously, reducing it to practice. Thoreau had something like this in mind when he suggested spending one day like a muskrat, up to his eyes in the marsh. But the restorationist goes a step further and actually, like a real muskrat, contributes to the shaping and dynamics of the marsh.

Third, restoration gives us something we need that other creatures don't—that is, a sense of history, and especially the history of our relationship with the landscape being restored. Restoration does this precisely because it is to some extent an effort to reverse that history by compensating in a precise way for our influence on it.

In this way, it becomes a way of exploring our relationship with the system in time as well as in space—in the historical as well as in the ecological dimension. This in turn tells us something about who we are—who we are, that is, in relation to the landscape around us—which is something we have to know if we are to achieve a vital relationship with that landscape.

And fourthly (though probably not finally) restoration offers a way of celebrating our place in the landscape and our relationship with it. This may be something we don't think about very often, but it is a vital component of any relationship.

We see something like this in the ancient tradition, also mentioned by Thoreau, of ritually clearing and—if you will— restoring the sacred groves, an act that not only restored the groves, but that at the same time renewed—and celebrated—the worshiper's relationship with the gods of the landscape.

Restoration has something of that sort to offer. If each restoration project is a hundred acts of compensation and reparation, it is also a hundred acts of celebration and rejoicing. This is the burning of the prairies. It is Chris Bronny finding that the savanna still lives in scattered plants in a ruined pasture. Or Kathryn Baird calling in just as her article goes to press to report—a last minute bit of breaking news—that a least Bell's vireo has joined a list of birds seen this summer foraging at the site of her riparian restoration project.

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