

“Restoration” (The Word)

As readers of R&MN are aware, “restoration” is only one of a family of words used to refer to—what can we call it?—curatorial land management. Others include a cluster of words beginning with “re”—terms like rehabilitation, reclamation, revegetation, re-creation, and so forth, all of which convey some aspect of the basic idea of getting back to something that we find in the word restoration itself. They are the immediate relatives of restoration, its nuclear family.

Beyond this there are more general words such as stewardship, preservation, and of course management, which is included in the title of this journal as a sort of hedge or conceptual buffer zone between hard-core restoration and the larger community of related conservation concepts.

Each of these words has a slightly different meaning. Each has its own nuances of definition and connotation, and suggests a different approach to land management and a different perspective on it. Each has value. Yet for a long time I have felt that the word “restoration” has a special value that sets it apart from the rest. In fact, it seems to me it is in many ways the best available term under which to think about and carry out conservative land management, the keystone word that best describes what the natural area manager, the steward, and even the preservationist are really up to.

Almost—if not quite—the perfect word for this work.

I say this for two reasons.

The first is that the word restoration conveys the clearest commitment to a specific result. A softer-edged word like management, for example, conveys only a promise to manipulate the system. Preservation, strictly speaking, means leaving it alone. (Of course in practice preservation usually involves some management—but then it is restoration.) Neither conveys a clear commitment to any specific result. And all the other “re” words are vague on this point as well—“reclamation” so much so that it can refer *either* to the repair of a degraded ecosystem or to its destruction, as in the phrase “to reclaim the desert.”

Restoration, on the other hand, is explicit about objectives: it promises to return the system or landscape to some specified previous condition (dynamically conceived, of course), or to the condition of an existing model system.

As restorationists know better than anyone, this is in many ways a risky promise. The goal of restoration is often difficult to define, and commonly unattainable. No doubt this is one reason why environmentalists have been wary of restoration, and why restoration has been so prone to criticism: it alone promises a specific result, and so can be held to have failed when it fails to achieve it.

Yet the restorationist at least promises to try, and in the long run that is our best chance of actually ensuring the existence of classic and historic ecosystems.

The second reason for the special value of restoration as a rubric for the practice of natural area conservation is that, precisely because it makes so clear a promise, it most clearly raises the crucial questions that might otherwise be overlooked in the writing of the conservation contract.

Questions like: In what ways have humans influenced the system? Exactly what are the goals, and how are they to be chosen and defined, in historical as well as ecological terms? Will it be possible to reach this goal? Will it be feasible? How long will it take? How much will it cost—in time, effort, materials and money?

More deeply, what is the proper role of humans in the management of nature? And what is the value of the restored ecosystem? Is it greater than that of its natural counterpart? Or less? Or is it just different—and if so, then exactly what is the difference?

These are all critical questions in any kind of interaction with the natural landscape. They arise in land management work whatever it is called. But it seems to me they arise most forcefully and most clearly from work identified explicitly as restoration.

Hence the special importance of restoration as a defining term and starting point for all forms of natural area management aimed at the conservation of classic landscapes.

It seems to me it comes pretty close to the word we need to define this work.

Close, perhaps, but not perfect. The single weakness I see in restoration is that it suggests an objective conceived in static terms. In fact, the “st” in restoration itself comes from the same root—the Latin “stare,” to stand—as the “st” in static.

This is obviously a problem, since we are dealing with dy-

dynamic systems, and it would be better if we had a term that expressed the idea of a return to a previous condition in more dynamic terms.

"Healing" is close, but still not perfect because, it seems to me, by replacing the historic model with the abstract idea of health as an objective it again softens the idea, creating a fuzziness into which populations and ecosystem processes may disappear.

Also, it affects the experiential aspect of the work, eliminating the idea of restoration as reenactment, a way of exploring the past.

Perhaps what we need is a word that combines the meanings of healing and restoration. But until we find such a word, or make it up, it seems to me that restoration is the best available.

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