

Appellplatz

As most readers of *R&MN* are well aware, there has been a good deal of discussion in restoration circles in recent years about definitions. What does “restoration” mean? And how is it related to a host of other words and terms, such as “reclamation,” “rehabilitation,” “stewardship,” and the like, all of which point more or less, if not exactly in the same direction.

It is not my intention to resolve this matter here, but rather to point out just one distinction that has occurred to me in the course of listening in on this discussion, and that I think may be worth taking into account as we go about our work.

The distinction I have in mind is the distinction between “restoration” on the one hand and “healing” on the other.

Most of us, I think, tend to blur these together, thinking of them as almost interchangeable, but of course they are not. Though they often overlap in practice, they are not the same. They imply different objectives, and represent different ways of thinking about and dealing with the landscape. And this being the case, they produce very different results—different kinds of landscapes, for one thing, but also different ways of relating to them.

So the difference between these words and the ideas behind them is important. Yet it is easy to overlook, and I suspect that this may be especially true in a New World setting, where restoration—a return to a previous condition—often does mean healing—the restoration of health—as well.

The difference becomes clearer from the perspective of an Old World landscape, where it becomes more difficult to confuse a return to a previous condition with the restoration of health, if only because we generally know more about the history of Old-World landscape, which makes it harder to project onto it our cherished notions of pristine and “original” health.

This fact was pressed home for me not long ago when I met a young woman who had spent part of the previous summer helping to restore the Appellplatz (or roll-call area) at the site of a former Nazi prison camp in Furstenberg, Germany. The Appellplatz had been a cinder-covered area where prisoners were made to stand for long periods in all kinds of weather, often barefoot, while roll-call was taken.

A monument, in short, to human cruelty. Yet a monument in its monstrous way worth saving—and restoring. But here, of course, restoration meant the precise opposite of healing. In fact, it meant sterilizing the site, removing early-successional grasses and weeds that had begun to move in, returning it to its “original,” sterile—and of course highly symbolic—condition, free of health, free even of life itself.

Clearly, this is not healing. But it is restoration. And, while this is an extreme case, it applies to all conservation work, serving as a forceful reminder that to return an ecosystem to a former condition (an olive grove, for example, or a willow coppice, a mowing meadow or a tallgrass prairie) is not necessarily to return it to a *healthier* condition.

But why does this matter? It matters because the two paradigms, the two ways of working, and of thinking about our work, produce very different results.

Objectively, healing, when successful, results in a healthy—or healthier—ecosystem, which may or may not include particular species or communities or processes. Restoration, on the other hand, when successful, results in the creation of an ecosystem that resembles the model, historic ecosystem in crucial (and ideally in all) respects whether we consider that healthy (or useful or interesting or beautiful) or not.

And similarly it matters in the subjective dimension because restoration and healing result in different kinds of experience and, in the end, produce different meanings.

Thus, healing is concerned primarily with the future. And it emphasizes the goal of independence, of getting the “patient” ecosystem back on its feet, making it self-sufficient, whatever its history might be.

Restoration, on the other hand, is explicitly about the past. It is, to use Robert Frost’s phrase, the tribute of the current to the source—in itself a very beautiful and important act, and one that offers, in a way that healing does not, a way of exploring the past and examining the role “we” (whether as individuals, or as members of a community, a civilization, or even a species) have played in it.

And in asserting our dependence on the past it serves as a constant reminder that in the last analysis there is no independence, no such thing as an ecosystem that is ecologically detached either from its surroundings or from its history—no such thing as a self-sustaining ecosystem.

Clearly, restoration and healing are not the same—and just as clearly we need both. We need healing to create the healthy ecosystems needed to sustain life. And we need restoration to conserve the classic ecosystems, communities and species that are the heritage of the past.

We need both, and—which is the essential point—we can’t have both—in fact, can’t really have either—unless we distinguish clearly between them.

William R. Jordan III