What are We Afraid Of?

In ways spoken and unspoken, people in the United States seem to be living with a greater level of fear these days. Of course, Americans always knew what fear was—that emotional state humans feel when they or those they care about are in danger—but during the prosperous 1990s I think we forgot or became disconnected from our own vulnerability and mortality. The events of September 11, 2001; the deaths, sickness, and scares caused by anthrax-laden letters sent by persons still unknown; and the concerns about the federal government limiting constitutional rights in the name of national security have reshaped that more complacent, satisfied mood. These events have resharpened our focus on fear and all its relatives—anxiety, dread, paranoia, terror, and worry.

Now the environmental community is no stranger to fear. Environmentalists are legitimately concerned and afraid that the world as we know it is going to hell in a hand basket. Environmentalists fear the death of the Earth and its habitants, both human and other-than-human. For decades, environmental orators and writers have warned us that there are too many humans on the planet and that human activities are a danger to all beings. The environmental lexicon is full of references to species loss, habitat loss, endangered and threatened species and ecosystems, biotic homogenization, and the like. These ideas go back at least to the writings of George Perkins Marsh (*Man and Nature*, 1864) and continue through the works of Victor Shelford, Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Michael Soulé, Dave Foreman, and many others. The inevitable result of this fear of loss is a defensive position that seeks to protect and preserve those beings and places that we have identified as valuable. Don't get me wrong, I think that preservation activities are important and generally beneficial. I also recognize, however, that this philosophy carries an expensive psychological price tag—living with day-to-day fear in a world that is perceived as being increasingly wounded.

Now the flip side of fear is another human psychological state—hope. Ecological restoration, one might argue, emerged from that same line of preservationist thought and serves as an antidote to their sense of ecological dread. Indeed, both Marsh and Leopold pointed to restoration as a means to address the problem of ecological loss. More recently, Bill Jordan, in this editorial space and elsewhere, has argued that ecological restoration is the perfect means for repairing not only the heterogeneity and diversity of our damaged environment, but for renewing our connection with ecosystems we inhabit. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that Marsh, Leopold, and Jordan are onto something in terms of of the proper ecological-cultural role of humans in the world.

But, let's be honest. While it is true that ecological restoration is a hope-filled enterprise, restorationists also have their share of fear and trepidation. My sense is that there are at least three fears common to the restoration community—fear of making mistakes, fear of working with others, and fear about the future. All these fears reveal themselves in our language, our interactions, and, ultimately, our work.

Restorationists have plenty of reasons to fear that their projects may not turn out as planned. Ecological restoration is an activity filled with uncertainty, incomplete data, and, to a lesser extent, a lack of expertise. Certainly some of these shortcomings can be overcome by building the feedback loop of adaptive management into the planning and execution of projects, by doing more research of both a historical and scientific nature, and by training and educating workers and clients. But strategies such as these are often outside the budgetary constraints of a given project, as Ed Garbisch pointed out in a recent book review (*ER* 19(1):62-63). Thus the fear of making mistakes remains because the ethical restorationist must continue to worry about the charge to restore a certain species, habitat type, or ecosystem. Moreover, when mistakes are made (as they inevitably are), they tend to be hidden, discussed with only a few trusted people, and almost never published. I know this latter point is true because I have had several people tell me that they were not interested in writing an article about the mistakes they made on a restoration project. On the rare occasion when someone actually admits an error in public, as John Zentner bravely did in a recent issue (*ER* 19(2): 81-82), there likewise seems to be no interest in discussing the matter in a public forum. What are we afraid of?

Some people may be surprised that I think restorationists have a fear of working with others. Certainly there are thousands of examples of restorationists working with community groups, agencies, non-profits, public works departments, and individuals in the planning and implementation of restoration projects. I applaud, support, and respect these efforts, but I also sense that these partnerships have not always been easy, that egos get in the way, and that, given a choice, restorationists would opt to work alone or within their own group. This is, perhaps, not surprising because so few restorationists receive any kind of training in the organizing and leadership aspects of the work. Furthermore, we

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all recognize that there are fewer variables and fewer opinions to be concerned about when working alone or within a group that has a fairly homogeneous identity. However, it is when restorationists, either on their own or due to the requirements of the project, reach out to those who know little about our experience or are antagonistic to it, that the fear for our selves, our group, our project (our hope) comes to the fore. We do, indeed, sense danger. It is at these times that we must rely on courage and leadership as well as science to see us through. We must recognize the political and social aspects of our work, and give to them the effort and resources that they require. Yes, it is nice just to be a person collecting prairie seeds on a cool autumn day, but it is also crucial to make peace with the Other, whomever they may be.

Finally, restorationists fear what the future might entail. Part of this is the environmentalists' fear of loss, now and in the future. The other part is a very real anxiety about whether our ecological restoration projects will remain a vital component of the landscape over the long term. One of the biggest mistakes a restorationist can make is to assume that a project is "completed" once the planting or animal reintroduction has taken place.

The ethical restorationist knows that a project is never really finished and that she must have strategies, resources, and alliances in place that will assure the longevity of the project. These strategies should include establishing monitoring protocols, identifying a management schedule, and securing a continual supply of resources (money, labor) to do the management and monitoring work. Building sustainability into projects might also involve establishing volunteer groups, working with government agencies and nonprofit organizations. This challenging and necessary work must also be bolstered by continuing to educate young people about the environment, conservation, and restoration. Within that environmental educational process, teachers and naturalists must find ways to bring their students a hopeful, yet realistic, message about their role as inhabitants of the Earth. Restorationists can play an important part in this process by helping the younger generation learn how to use ecological restoration to bring their cultural and environmental aspirations together.

The events of the last months should give us pause. I think every restorationist needs to ask the question: What am I afraid of? Personally, my deepest fear is that this idea of restoration will be subverted by the forces of undemocratic and commercially-oriented globalization—that the work many of us have been involved in for decades will be overrun and left to deteriorate like an old ruin in a future world that I never wanted but couldn't avoid. I do, however, take the good counsel of the Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön who points out that fear is a natural reaction—part of being alive, something all humans share. Moreover, she reminds me that our fears are feelings we must get to know in order to develop the courage to face the unknown. So, I encourage everyone to take some time, consider your fears and with them in mind continue to creatively explore, improve, and expand the possibilities of ecological restoration.

Dave Egan

Pods

Fuzzy and barely swollen
Easily overlooked, they are
A restitution in the making,
An attempt at human understanding
of big, deep Earth.

Raised in the greenhouse
Wedged into a prairie restoration
Years later their waxing roots
Shape seeds to scatter.

Fuzzy and barely swollen
Easily overlooked
Easily lost to more vicissitudes
Than we can comprehend.

—*Jenny McBride*