

Restoring Our Future

During the past 20 plus years, my colleagues and I have had the privilege of working on some very interesting and rewarding ecological restoration projects, like the times we have worked with inner-city kids in restoring freshwater tidal wetlands along the Anacostia River in Washington, D.C., and the summer we spent hiking the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia to assess stream morphology and trout habitat. I also fondly recall the many times we have worked up and down the mid-Atlantic coast restoring barrier island sand dunes while catching glimpses of humpback whales during their winter migration. Currently we are fortunate enough to be working with towns across North America crafting watershed management plans that will help galvanize support for natural resource protection and set in action initiatives to push ecological restoration to the forefront of the public agenda for years to come. A hundred acres of freshwater tidal wetlands restored here, five miles of coastal dune restored there, and more than 400 square miles of watersheds protected. All good stuff, right? You bet, but is it enough?

According to the United Nations, current world population stands at about 6.5 billion people, and will peak at about 9 billion people in 45 years. It is projected that more than 60 percent of these people will be living in cities. By itself, a 40-percent increase in population size may or may not be cause for alarm with regards to our ecological well-being. But consider this: since 1950, the average house in the United States has doubled in size even though the average family size has steadily decreased. China, where household size has shrunk from 4.5 people per house in 1985 to a projected 2.7 people per house by 2015, is in a similar demographic situation. Nevertheless, China plans to develop more than 80 million *more* houses than it would otherwise had. Given this level of change, meeting the needs of the world's population growth and its rising affluence will require an unprecedented consumption of more

and more resources. In fact, almost every day I witness firsthand a relentless charge to develop more and more land and to sequester more and more resources to support this surge. I now find myself thinking about the role ecological restoration should play, in fact *will* play, as our population continues to grow, our natural capital continues to shrink, and our connection to the land slowly disappears. Here's how.

First, ecological restoration will continue to play *the* pivotal role in our efforts to restore large-scale ecosystems, like the Florida Everglades or the West Africa Forest Ecosystem. In doing so, however, ecological restoration needs to continue to recognize traditional ecological knowledge and engage on-going cultural practices to be successful.

Second, ecological restoration will play a critical role in restoring natural systems that provide the world with clean water, clean air, fertile soils, and other essential ecosystem services. This inherently requires that the approaches restorationists employ, and their subsequent outcomes, embrace human-dominated landscapes.

Third, ecological restoration has a major role to play in our quest to live more sustainably and to reconnect people to the landscape. If the essence of sustainability is sustaining the conditions that enable all life forms to flourish and reach their evolutionary potential, then ecological restoration will be an essential ingredient in future land development activities.

While this won't come easy, there are already major shifts beginning to happen around the world in how we think about, use, and care for our planet. I am certain that ecological restoration will play a meaningful role in *restoring our future!*

What role do you think ecological restoration should play in our future? Join one of our list-serves or e-mail us at www.info@ser.org, and let us know what you think.

*Keith Bowers, Chair
Society for Ecological Restoration International*