A Brave New World

The day after Barak Obama became the 44th President of the United States of America, I flew to Chicago to attend the Great Lakes Urban Habitat Restoration Symposium, which was organized by a consortium of Canadian and American government agencies and environmental nonprofits. While most other speakers focused on regional specifics, my job was to provide a global view of ecological restoration and the role of the Society for Ecological Restoration International (SERI) in fostering the science and practice of our craft. My participation in this event was encouraged by SERI secretary and long-time board member Karen Rodriguez, who felt that it was critically important to communicate to attendees the long-term contributions to restoration within the Great Lakes region. The Chicago area was considered so important to restoration that it was the site of the 1990 SERI conference, the second ever held. Restoration programs, such as those at Fermilab and Chicago Wilderness, have huge importance in the history of restoration thought and to the development of restoration techniques.

The Great Lakes restoration conference was abuzz with talk about the new president and what the new U.S. presidency would mean for all of us. The magnitude of the global economic meltdown in 2008 may take social scientists years or even decades to understand, but it is clear that the world will never be the same. Massive social change is coming, and the environment is poised for prominence within this process. The old model that separates business from ecological health has been trashed, and people are pushing governments and businesses alike to "Go Green!" But where will we, the ecological restorationists, be in this process? Will our voices be heard? Will we get things done?

Change is indeed coming, but I felt there wasn't enough historical context at the conference or recognition of all of the groundwork done to make this day possible and of all the work going on now all over the world. I started my presentation with my most important point, "You are not alone!" But I felt a little like Fox Mulder in *The X-Files*. Sometimes when I talk to people about restoration, it feels like all of the evidence of past restoration work has been packed up and hidden away in some government repository. And even more eerie is the lack of awareness of the good works taking place all around us.

One of the most wonderful things about ecological restoration is its spontaneity. Over and over again, all over the planet, people have created and discovered the practice of ecological restoration. Whether planting trees or reintroducing fire or controlling invasive species or augmenting depleted populations of animals or plants, it all just makes so much sense. But there is a downside to this spontaneity in that all too often we fail to pay enough attention to those who came before us and to all of our peers around the world who are doing the same or similar things. We have so much to learn from one another. And we have no time to waste.

We are in a pivotal evolutionary moment as a species, and what happens to our home, our planet, is in our hands, right now. And although many might disagree with the Gaia hypothesis or the ideas of planetary management or sustainable development, global climate change and the extinction crisis make it clear that what we do as individuals and as a species matters to the planet and its occupants. And it matters a lot. So what are we, as restorationists, to do?

One of the real weaknesses inherent in the historical development of ecological restoration is its early association with mitigation. In North America, both ideas developed in temporal parallel and I remember clearly how people nearly came to blows at the first SERI meetings 20 years ago because some people felt that restoration was somehow evil. If you could restore something it might somehow give you the political right to destroy it, and that was morally wrong. The amount of effort expended trying to distance ecological restoration from mitigation was enormous, and the wars over the definition of restoration were brutal and went on for more than a decade. As inclusive as SERI and this journal were in gathering practitioners, scientists, artists, indigenous peoples, and volunteers in the early days, we still emerged as a small group without the social power we needed to effect massive change. In our own way, we were snobs.

Over the years, we never stopped trying to distance ourselves from mitigation, and pitched battles continued over the R words, especially restoration (good) and rehabilitation (evil). Because rehabilitation was associated with mitigation and development (more evil), anything that failed to meet strict definitions of restoration were rehabilitation projects and thus suspect. I really can't count the

Ecological Restoration Vol. 27, No. 2, 2009
ISSN 1522-4740 E-ISSN 1543-4079

number of times I have heard the words "that's not restoration!" So perfectly good projects that restored ecological functionality and species were sneered at because they took place on spoil piles, in people's backyards, or in urban or rural fragments disconnected from "nature." I am perfectly fine with strict definitions of restoration, so long as we, as a profession, recognize that most efforts at restoring any attribute of ecological health are good, and anything that discourages these efforts is bad.

Jeff Schaeffer, one of the other speakers at the Great Lakes symposium, described an idea new to me, that of reconciliation ecology, introduced in *Win-Win Ecology: How the Earth's Species Can Survive in the Midst of Human Enterprise* (Rosenzweig 2003). In his book, Michael Rosenzweig makes the case that two pillars of conservation are reservation (= preservation) and restoration, but that something is missing. What is needed is meaningful action in the places where people work and live. Schaeffer provided some examples of reconciliation ecology, including the National Wildlife Federation's Backyard Habitat Program, but also artificial reefs and bird nesting platforms on electrical power poles—clearly not restoration. While I am not sure I like the term "reconciliation ecology" I do like the idea that these kinds of efforts are described as positive, instead of "that's rehabilitation" and therefore imperfect or even worse, bad.

As we go forth into the fog of the future we must embrace these allied efforts and the restoration work of our peers and neighbors. I don't care if the projects are perfect restoration, or what we call them, just that we encourage them for what they are—a very important and significant contribution to restoring local and regional ecosystem health. But don't make any mistake about it; the time to move forward is now. We have to make ecological restoration a part of the political agenda, or we might end up with a dystopia of someone else's making.

George Gann
Chair, Society for Ecological Restoration International

Reference

Rosenzweig, M.L. 2003. *Win-Win Ecology: How the Earth's Species Can Survive in the Midst of Human Enterprise*. New York: Oxford University Press.