Editorial

Two Psychologies

There are at least two distinct ways of regarding the business of ecological restoration and its social and political implications.

The first, and perhaps the most obvious, is the idea that restoration—or the promise of restoration—is likely to encourage people to become casual about the need for preserving existing natural landscapes. Once people get the idea that natural ecosystems can be recycled like old newspapers, or shifted around the countryside like checkers on a checkerboard, any prospect for preserving them will be further diminished.

In this view restoration, despite its value as a way of coping with immediate environmental problems, is in the long-run a threat to the environment because it can be abused, and also because it flies in the face of the claims of "fragility" and "irreplaceability" that have been prominent in environmental rhetoric for at least a generation.

There is obviously a good deal of truth to this. When politicians, for example, start talking about "no net loss" of wetlands, we know that is code for restoration/mitigation, and we can only hope their concern about the issue of standards and authenticity in restored wetlands matches their enthusiasm for this new technology and the brave new world of checkerboard conservation it suggests to the fatuous or ecologically unsophisticated.

When they don't, then we do have a problem on our hands. And we are going to have to learn to deal with that problem—to see to it that restoration comes of age as a healing art, and not as a sort of environmental license to kill.

In doing so, however, it will be important not to err on the other side—not to deny categorically the possibility of restoration, or to exaggerate its difficulty and uncertainty.

I say this because I believe there is another kind of psychology going on here—one quite different from the obvious notion that the possibility of restoration will be seized upon as a license to destroy.

It may be true that the promise—or the possibility—of restoration may be abused. But is it not also true that the notion that restoration is impossible—whether in practice or in principle—might lead to despair over the long-term prospects of a conservation program that can only slow loss or deterioration in nature but can never reverse it, and over the idea that human influence on wild nature is invariably negative and irreversible?

For, after all, to teach the non-renewability of nature, is to deny the fecundity and creative power of nature. It is, actually, to turn nature into a non-renewable resource, like coal or oil. So it is, in this sense, to kill nature. (This is where Bill McKibben, the author of the recently-published book, *The End of Nature*, has it exactly wrong. We put an end to nature not by touching and contaminating it, but by refusing to participate in it.)

Just as bad, to deny our ability to participate in the renewal of nature is ultimately to deny us genuine membership in the land community. If all we can do to wild nature is injure it, that makes us vandals, or at best visitors in nature—necessarily consumers and detractors. The obvious conclusion is that we don't really belong on this planet.

This is hardly an encouraging message. In fact, it is a desperate message, and if people come to believe it, you might expect desperate behavior and a grab-while-you-can mentality that leads to a descending spiral of injury and deepening despair.

The intention, of course, is to heighten awareness of the value of nature by emphasizing its uniqueness and irreplaceability. But the effect may be just the opposite.

By closing off the possibility of reparation, you close off the essential economic/ecological basis for restraint: if reparation is impossible, it need not be figured into my calculations. Offered a choice about destroying, say, a wetland, I may well say, what the hell. Being unrestorable, it's doomed anyway in the long run. Someone—or something—is going to do away with it, and it might as well be me. Besides that, since it can't be restored, there's no way of compensating for any harm that may result. So there is, really, no way of calling me to account.

Open up, on the other hand, the possibility of repair and reparation, and you open up the possibility of membership and responsibility. Now my decision about the wetland will be made in light of my understanding that the marsh is a live thing, dependent on me as I am on it, and that I will be expected to compensate *in kind* for any harm I do to it. Then each time I plunge a shovel into the peat I will be asking myself what it will cost (in time, skill, money, care . . .) to reverse the effects of that action.

Not that that's the whole story either. What we need is respect for both psychologies: first a healthy skepticism about the prospects for restoration. And *also* a vigorous appreciation for the value of the act of restoration as a way of establishing and affirming our membership in the land community.

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Clarification: In her guest editorial on the importance of accurate and complete reporting of the costs of restoration projects [R&MN 7 (2) p. 56], Marylee Guinon refers to an often-cited per-acre figure of $1,800 ($4,500/ha) for riparian habitat restoration that she says is based "all too loosely on work carried out by The Nature Conservancy in California." Bruce Handley, coordinator of the habitat restoration team for the California TNC, notes that the figure is indeed misleading partly because the project is incomplete, but that the TNC is not responsible for its circulation.