

Restoring Nature

Continuing the Conversation

by Paul H. Gobster and R. Bruce Hull

RESTORING NATURE



*Perspectives from the Social Sciences
and Humanities*

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In the course of our lives we are sometimes confronted by events that jolt us out of our everyday experience. These events can be positive—the birth of a child, a move to a new region or country, the rediscovery of a species thought to be lost from an ecosystem. Such events can also be negative—the death of a loved one, a lost political battle, the bulldozing of a favorite natural area. With some distancing and reflection, these events often produce profound insights. *Restoring Nature* is an attempt to draw value from one such event, the Chicago restoration controversy.

As Karen Rodriguez and Kent Fuller describe in their review, the controversy negatively impacted many restorationists and the places they care deeply about. If by using the controversy as a touchstone for our work we opened healing wounds, we apologize. As researchers, conference session conveners, and ultimately as editors of *Restoring Nature*, we saw it as an important opportunity to make something positive out of something negative, to study and develop ideas that might help improve the outcome of similar situations. The volume's contributors brought their expertise in social sciences and humanities to bear on this restoration controversy's unfolding events in hopes of identifying powerful and lasting lessons.

One of the fundamental lessons is that ecological restoration has as much to do with social organization, cultural conflict, and human values as it does with natural science, native species, and eco-

logical processes. We believe this lesson is consistent with an emerging view within the restoration community. As Dave Egan wrote in *Ecological Restoration* earlier this year "As restoration moves increasingly into the public realm, our understanding of social issues, including how to recognize the power we have and how to share it with others, will help our group become an important and respected member of the larger community" (*ER* 19(2):68). Scholarly publication provides a key way to begin a discourse about this realm, and with our book we hope to advance an understanding of social issues not only among restoration practitioners and researchers, but also planners, landscape architects, policymakers, and others who may directly or indirectly interact with public groups in restoration projects.

Restoring Nature attempts to examine ecological restoration through the analytical tools, theoretical models, and philosophical understandings provided by the social sciences and humanities. We asked four essential questions that every restoration project must consider:

- 1) How can restorationists best justify to society their projects that necessarily compete for limited resources with other pressing social and environmental needs?
- 2) Which of the many possible "natural" conditions should be selected as the goals of restoration projects?
- 3) How can the diverse range of stakeholders be engaged so as to minimize

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conflict and maximize support? How can restoration projects get off the drawing tables, out of the courts, and be implemented effectively on the ground?

- 4) How can restoration projects be organized so as to mobilize and maintain the volunteers upon whom most projects depend?

Through essays and empirical studies by respected scholars from across the United States, we sought to clarify and provide tentative answers to these questions. As a first attempt in building a body of knowledge in this area, we claim only partial success. As our reviewers have pointed out, we need to broaden our models and perspectives. For example, William Throop emphasizes that restoration occurs in a range of landscapes throughout the urban-wildland continuum. Many of our contributors targeted metropolitan area restoration projects, and while we believe that most of their findings should translate to other settings, unique lessons can also be learned from studies in more remote settings. In a related vein, Harry Webne-Behrman's comments on conflict management in community-based restoration efforts point to the need for further studies of group processes, conflict mediation approaches, and social and psychological theory to help us better understand and deal with restoration disputes. Finally, Rodriguez and Fuller argue that more work is needed in the area of policy and communication studies to understand how restoration organizations might operate more effectively, including how experts can better interface with volunteer groups. Additionally, they suggest that future studies might provide insights on how messages from restoration organizations and from the media affect public perceptions. We agree with all of these suggestions. If restoration science can expand its research program to include these varied perspectives, we might all

find ourselves in much better position to address the essential questions that face every restoration project.

People are passionate about restoration. This is made clear both by the findings in our book and by the three reviews here. We are optimistic in our belief that

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this passion bodes well for the future of restoration. We need such passion because ecological restoration is a wickedly complex endeavor, one that forces us to confront our fundamental relationships with, and responsibilities to, the community of nature of which we are part. Restorationists must operate with imperfect knowledge. There is often scant data about previous environmental conditions, and future environmental and social conditions of surrounding ecosystems often alter the trajectory of a restored system. Restorationists must make tragic choices. Some species and processes will be lost and replaced by

other, desired species and processes. Some people's hopes and dreams will dominate the preferences and sensibilities of others. The courage and dedication required to restore ecological systems most certainly demands passion. As passionate students and advocates of restoration, we actively encourage discussions that have as their purpose improving the goals and means of ecological restoration.

We thank Dave Egan and the contributing reviewers for their thoughtful comments about our edited volume, *Restoring Nature: Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Humanities*. One of our primary goals in starting this project three years ago was to begin this serious and much needed conversation about the social dimensions of ecological restoration. As evidenced by the diversity of viewpoints conveyed in the preceding pages, this goal is being accomplished. But, beginning a conversation is not enough. We are only now beginning to understand the social complexities of ecological restoration. And, ecological restoration efforts have much to gain from the continued applications of the social sciences and humanities. We will continue to focus our energies on these tasks. The readers of *Ecological Restoration* can also provide insights by sharing the lessons from their own experiences and research on the essential questions raised here. We will need your help as we continue this conversation.

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