

Ethics and Ecological Restoration

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It is an old wag among environmentalists that humans have become disconnected from nature. The culprits for this conundrum are various. If it is not our addiction to technological enticements then it is our life in big cities which alienate us from our "earthen elements." The presumed result of this disconnection is that we do not respect the land anymore and turn a blind eye to the environmental consequences of our collective acts of consumption and pollution. Various bits of evidence are produced to prove this point – mostly anecdotal – such as the claim that many city-dwellers, when asked where their food comes from, will respond blankly, "from a grocery store."

What is the curative for this ailment? Surprisingly, it is not that we should send urbanites out to the factory farms, county-sized feed lots, or flavor factories in New Jersey, which actually put most of the food on the shelves of neighborhood markets. It is instead usually suggested that we should send people to wilderness areas, that we should become more connected with nature in the raw, as it were. E. O. Wilson's "biophilia" hypothesis is a good case in point. Defending a sociobiological account of why humans are innately attracted to living things, Wilson suggests that this connection is best realized in the residual attachment of humans to wild nature. This grounds a claim that the most important task at hand is to focus on "the central questions of human origins in the wild environment" (Wilson 1992, 351).

It is probably unfair to suggest that Wilson thinks that we should all go to the wilderness in order to be better connected with nature, and implicitly, to then

become better people. There are many others though, such as David Abram and Holmes Rolston III, who make similar such cases and do argue that we are better people if and when we are connected to wild nature (see Light 2001). An alternative view however is that it is much more important to connect people with the natural systems in their own back yards and public places where they do live rather than striving to engage them with the environments of their prehistoric ancestors.

There are many reasons that I would make such a claim. One might be the healthy skepticism that has evolved in the past fifteen years over what is meant by “wilderness” at all by scholars such as William Cronon and company. Another would be an argument that development of human lifestyles which wind up being better for other critters and larger natural systems do not necessarily depend on encouraging an active respect for nature as a moral subject in its own right. In fact, I think we are more likely to get sustainability through changes in infrastructure than changes in environmental consciousness (see Light 2003a). But at bottom it is simply not true that visiting wilderness will necessarily make everyone care more about nature, or come to regret their “disconnection” from it and the consumption patterns engendered by that alienation any more than visiting the Louvre or MOMA will necessarily make one interested in the preservation of great works of art and develop a disdain for schlocky forms of pop culture. It is no doubt correct that knowledge of something – be it art or nature – can encourage appreciation and even value of it, but exposure to something does not necessarily get us knowledge of it, and though they are no doubt connected, development of taste does not necessarily make for a coherent or consistent moral psychology.

But rather than further developing those arguments here I will assume their plausibility and investigate another topic. What if there is something to this

worry about disconnection from nature absent the more absurd prescriptions that are offered to cure us of it? What if it is true that we would be more respectful of natural systems, and more interested in maintenance of their integrity or health, if we came to care more about them because we did think of them as part of our lives? My sense is that such questions need not necessarily lead us down the road to a family trip to Yellowstone. The nature that most of us should encounter is much closer to home.

My central claim in this chapter will be that one way in which we can find ourselves in a closer relationship with nature is through the practice of restoration of natural ecosystems, quickly becoming one of the most influential forms of contemporary environmental management and landscape design. As I have argued at length elsewhere, one of the more interesting things about ecological restorations are that they are amenable to public participation. If we give a chance to members of a local community to help to restore a stream in a local park then we offer them an opportunity to become intimately connected to the nature around them. There may be more important bits of nature for people to be connected to as they are ones that they can engage with often, even everyday, rather than only thinking of nature as residing in far flung exotic places set aside for special trips. It is like coming to appreciate a good set of family photos, some of loved ones long past and some still with us, and not worrying too much that our homes are not filled with original works of art or that we get to visit those places where such art is on display.

[...]

1. Restoration, Participation, and Sustainability

Ecological restorations can range from small scale urban park reclamations, such as the ongoing restorations in urban parks across the country, to huge wetland mitigations. In all cases restorationists seek to recreate landscapes or ecosystems which previously existed at a particular site but which now have been lost (e.g., wetlands, tall grass prairies, and various riparian systems). On two indicators of the importance of environmental activities – number of voluntary person hours logged on such projects and amount of dollars spent – restoration ecology is one of the most pressing and important environmental priorities on the national environmental agenda. For example, the cluster of restorations known collectively as the “Chicago Wilderness” project in the forest preserves surrounding Chicago, would attract at their height some 2500-3000 volunteers annually to help restore 17,000 acres of native Oak Savannah which have slowly become lost in the area (Stevens 1995). The final plan for the project is to restore upwards of 100,000 acres. As for financial commitments, the restoration of the Florida everglades begun during the Clinton administration will come in at over \$8 billion making it one of the largest single pieces of environmental legislation in history.

As a scientific practice restoration ecology is governed primarily by such academic disciplines as field botany, conservation biology, landscape ecology and adaptive ecosystem management. But as an environmental practice most restoration in the field is undertaken by landscape architecture and landscape design firms. Restoration sites must be carefully planned and designed as they are actively created rather than only identified and protected as existing natural areas. A casual reader of the leading journal for practitioners in the field, *Ecological Restoration*, will quickly see that its back pages are dominated by advertisements for landscape architecture firms specializing in restoration work and by universities seeking to attract students to programs of study in landscape

architecture. Some past presidents of the Society for Ecological Restoration, such as Tony Clewell, head prominent landscape architecture firms.

Recognizing that successful restorations must bring together various allied fields in environmental science with the design strengths of landscape architecture demonstrates the inherent interdisciplinarity of this activity. But in addition to the scientific and design questions at the heart of restoration work, which have received substantial attention in the literature, there are also ethical issues which bring to light competing priorities for any given project.

Unfortunately these ethical issues, and the dilemmas they sometimes present for restorationists, have been woefully under explored by environmental ethicists.

When restoration is taken up by environmental ethicists, the results are mostly negative. While there are some notable exceptions (see for example Gunn 1991, Rolston 1994, Scherer 1995, and Throop 1997), the most influential work by environmental philosophers on this topic, surely that of Eric Katz and Robert Elliot, have largely consisted in arguments that ecological restoration does not result in a restoration of “nature,” and that further, it may even harm nature considered as a subject worthy of moral consideration (Katz 1997, Elliot 1982 and 1997).

These criticisms stem directly from the principal concerns of environmental ethicists, namely to describe the non-human centered (nonanthropocentric) and non-instrumental value of nature (see Brennan 1998 and Light 2002a). If nature has some kind of intrinsic or inherent value – or value in its own right regardless of its use to anything else – then a wide range of duties, obligations, and rights may be required in our treatment of it. This is much the same way that we think about the reasons we have moral obligations to other humans in many ethical systems. Kant’s duty based ethics argued that each human has a value in and of themselves such that we should treat them

never only as a means to furthering our own ends but also as an end in themselves. But one immediate worry is that if nature has a value in comparable terms then a discernable line must be drawn between those things possessing this sort of value and those things which do not have this value and hence do not warrant the same degree of moral respect. Such a demarcation line is critically important, for if it cannot be established then the extension of moral respect beyond the human community might result in an absurd state of affairs where we hold moral obligations to everything around us. If that were the case then perhaps I am doing something unsavory at the moment by merely using the pen I am writing this chapter with only to fulfill my own ends. Thus, the demarcation line designating natural value in a moral sense must distinguish between “nature” and non-natural “artifacts” or realms of identifiable “nature” and “culture.”

One problem with restored landscapes for both Elliot and Katz is that they can never duplicate the value of the original nature which has been lost and which restorationists seek to replace. The reason restorations cannot duplicate the original value of nature is that they are closer on the metaphysical spectrum to being artifacts rather than nature, especially when the latter is understood as an object of moral consideration. Restorations are the products of humans on this account; they are merely artifacts with a fleshy green hue. For Elliot, their value is more akin to a piece of faked art than an original masterpiece.

But such a view is the best case scenario for restorations on such accounts. Katz argues that when we choose to restore we dominate nature by forcing it to conform to our preferences for what we would want it to be, even if what we want is the result of benign intuitions of what is best for humans and nonhumans. Katz has argued that “the practice of ecological restoration can only

represent a misguided faith in the hegemony and infallibility of the human power to control the natural world” (Katz 1996, 222).

In part however Katz has softened his position in this regard, responding to recent criticisms that he thinks remediation is often our best policy option: “. . . the remediation of damaged ecosystems is a better policy than letting blighted landscape remain as is” (Katz 2002, 142). His reasoning here is that blighted landscapes are no longer really natural and hence our interaction with them cannot necessarily count as an instance of domination of nature. Such a view should sanction most restoration since very little of it, if any, is aimed at interfering with pristine landscapes. (This of course begs the question of whether restoration can ever lead to domination since we generally don’t try to restore landscapes that haven’t been damaged. No matter though. I will leave this worry for the moment.) But immediately after offering what may be his strongest positive claim yet about restoration, Katz repeats one of his now familiar criticisms: “. . . once we begin to adopt a general policy of remediation and restoration, we may come to feel omnipotent in the manipulation and management of nature. And thus we will create for ourselves a totally artifactual world” (Katz 2002, 142). Harking back to his earliest criticisms of restoration, Katz still insists that the practice of restoration will encourage us to develop more under the assumption that we will now think that we can always make up for the harm we have done to nature through restoration.

Unfortunately, such claims have received much attention by restoration practitioners. As a result, many of them have come to the unfortunate conclusion that philosophy is largely unhelpful in sorting out future directions for restoration practice. So reliant is such work on difficult to defend and often tedious arguments about the metaphysical status of nature that it is easy to empathize with this response.

Because of this situation I have been trying over the past few years to overcome the bad rap of philosophers working on restoration by first answering the philosophical criticisms of Elliot and Katz on restoration (Light 2003b and 2000b) and then moving forward to explore a different aspect of the ethical issues involved in this practice. As suggested above, my focus has been on the potential for restorations to serve as opportunities for the public to become more actively involved in the environment around them and hence in the potential for work on restoration projects to encourage environmental responsibility and stewardship (see especially Light 2000a and 2002b). While it would take further argument than I have space for here, the foundation of my claim has been that a direct, participatory relationship between local human communities and the nature they inhabit or are adjacent to is a necessary condition for encouraging people to protect natural systems and landscapes around them rather than trade off these environments for short-term monetary gains from development. If we have a strong relationship with the land around us we are probably less likely to allow it to be harmed further. Forming such relationships however does not require that we come to see nature itself as some kind of agent in and of itself that can be dominated like another human. It simply means that we must come to care about the land around us for some reason because it has a place in our lives worth caring about. One way that we might come to care about the land around us is to actively work it in some way. Ecological restoration offers us the opportunity to do just that.

Importantly however, the value of public participation needs further justification. In the case of restoration, participatory practices can be empirically demonstrated to get us better restorations because they create the sorts of relationships with nature suggested above. Sociological evidence focusing on the Chicago restorations suggests that voluntary participants in restoration projects

are more likely to adopt a benign attitude of stewardship and responsibility toward nature as a result of such interactions in restorations (see Miles 2000). The reasons are fairly obvious: participants in restoration projects learn more about the hazardous consequences of anthropogenic impacts on nature because they learn in practice how hard it is to restore something after it has been damaged. There is thus a strong empirical basis for the moral claim that restoration can serve as a kind of schoolhouse for environmental responsibility. At its core, participatory restorations create opportunities for public participation in nature; restorations become not only a restoration of nature, but also of the human cultural relationship with nature (this idea is developed in Light 2002b).

But capturing this particular moral advantage of restoration requires that public participation in these projects be actively encouraged. Ecological restorations can be produced in a variety of ways. While the Chicago restorations have involved a high degree of public participation, others have not. Partly the differences in these various projects has been a result of their differing scale and complexity. Dechannelizing a river in the Everglades will be a task for an outfit like the Army Corps of Engineers and not a local community group. But many restorations that could conceivably involve community participation often enough do not, and some which already involve community participation do not utilize that participation as much as they could. Each restoration therefore represents a unique opportunity to link a local public with its local environment and arguably to create a constituency devoted to the protection of that environment bound by ties of stewardship rather than law.

A still pressing question though is what kind of relationship is produced by interaction with a restored landscape? If we start from the nonanthropocentric perspective of Katz and Elliot then it is difficult to see restorations as anything other than mere artifacts. If we do not start from that

perspective then whether or not a restoration does produce “nature” or not is immaterial to the question of whether we can have direct moral obligations to it. We can’t. There is however a middle ground that produces a range of alternatives for us. In the remainder of this chapter I will try to give a more specific defense of the moral basis for public participation by suggesting different ways in which we can conceive of our possible relationships with restored natural systems. This argument will build on my previous work on this topic (especially Light 2000b) but also go beyond it. The core of my claim is that the restoration of the human relationship with nature is possible even if ecological restorations are culturally produced artifacts. Hopefully, even if one is skeptical of the artifact worry, unpacking the quality of such a relationship in more detail will help to give us additional reasons to maximize public participation in restoration whenever possible.

2. Relationships with Objects

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3. Restoration as a Source of Normative Ecological Relationships

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Can ecological restorations be a source of moral relationships with the natural environment? It seems entirely plausible if not unassailable that they can. Sociological research, like that mentioned above by Miles, is quite convincing on this point. In her study of 306 volunteers in the Chicago Wilderness projects the highest sources of satisfaction reported were in terms of

“Meaningful Action,” and “Fascination with Nature” (Miles 2000, 218-227).

“Meaningful Action” was gauged, for example, in the sense in which restorationists felt that they were “making life better for coming generations,” or “feeling that they were doing the right thing.” “Fascination with Nature,” was correlated with reports by volunteers that restoration helped them to “learn how nature works” (Miles 2000, 222). Participation in restorations can give volunteers a strong sense of connection with the natural processes around them and a larger appreciation of environmental problems in other parts of the world. Said one volunteer, “The more you know, the more you realize there is to learn,” not just in terms of understanding the peculiarities of a particular restoration site, but also generating a greater appreciation for the fragility of nature in other places in the face of anthropogenic distress.

[...]

While data like this from Chicago is limited, anecdotal evidence from the field confirms it. To paraphrase Robert Putnam, public participation in restorations helps to produce a kind of natural social capital in a community. It can become one link between people that helps to make them a community and as such the products of restoration can be respected as part of the glue that holds a community together. Why does participation in restorations help to make stronger communities? It could be because it produces a sense of place for people helping them to lay claim to a particular space as definitive of their home. But it could also be that for some volunteers there is something akin to the creation of a direct normative relationship with nature that is played out in something like phenomenological terms. They come to see the restorations they work in as part of who they are. Still, for others, restorations may be a source of

trans-generational value: if different generations of a family work the same restoration site then it may become a material link between them akin to the material link I feel to my grandfather through his glasses. What is important though is that none of these reasons needs to be considered decisive on this understanding of the value of restorations. Like the value we may find in artifacts, the reasons that we decide to be more careful in our treatment of a thing will most likely be multiple and overlapping, mirroring the multiple reasons we have for finding the relationships in our lives important. Because the framework here is not one entailing a form of nonanthropocentrism, which would of necessity need to find a value directly in a restored landscape and give reasons why it had value and other things did not, there is less reason to come up with a single grounding for this kind of value.

Some will object that lots of kinds of participation in public projects can create this kind of value. Certainly this is true, though there is no reason why the grounds for these kinds of relationships has to be unique or why they must be embodied in one kind of artifact (be it a green one or not) rather than another. If part of the value of participation in restorations is that they create opportunities for us to be in moral relationships with each other through something that either is a part of nature, or is at least connected to other things which are natural, then other opportunities to create those kinds of relationships will be valuable as well.

The point which must not be lost though is that the potential of restorations to produce these kinds of moral relationships with places and between persons is most likely only possible when people actually get to participate in either the production or maintenance of such sites, and hopefully in both. If we see the practice of landscape architecture as a moral practice, responsible to producing positive natural values in the same way that we may see a responsibility for architecture in general to produce things with positive

social values (see for example Harries 1998 and Steiner 2002), then the best restorations designed by landscape architects will involve a component of public participation in them as well. Good restorations which include this participatory component will maximize natural values by producing a set of relationships of care around such sites which will help to insure their protection and preservation into the future. At the same time, participatory restorations have the potential for producing landscapes inclusive of strong social values between persons as well. While no architectural project of any kind can do everything, maximizing public participation in restoration is at least one goal which is feasible as a mark to aim for whenever possible. As with any noble aim we give up much when we do not try to reach it at all.

4. Conclusions

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For all of the reasons offered so far in this chapter, the moral potential of restoration ecology, even if the objects produced by this practice are artifacts, is that they can produce “restorative relationships” between persons and nature, as well as simply between persons. What can be restored in a restoration is our connection to places and to each other. As I said at the beginning, much has been made of the claim that humans have become disconnected from nature. I am not so sure how connected we ever really were. But if it is correct that we were more connected at some time then perhaps the relationships possible through ecological restorations can go far in more concretely helping to shore up those connections. I for one am very happy that we need not go too far away from home to learn this lesson.

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