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What is restoration, anyway?

By Laura Watt November 3, 2011 11:48 am



Many of you have no doubt followed the dedicated restoration activities of Cotati Creek Critters through the years, but how many of you have stopped to ask yourself, “just what IS restoration, anyway?”

As a professor of Environmental Studies and Planning at Sonoma State Univeristy, I’ve been teaching a class for five years now that, instead of conveying the on-the-ground work of doing restoration projects, focuses on the ideas and theories behind restoration, asking some critical questions about the field:

Where did the idea of restoration come from? What are the goals of environmental restorations, and how do you know if a project is meeting those goals? What do we mean by the terms “wilderness,” “native,” “diversity,” and so forth? Do environmental mitigation projects really work? From these annual explorations with my students, one aspect of restoration has become clearer to me - that it is not an easy-to-define enterprise, particularly because of humans’ role in manipulating and maintaining the restored landscape.

Environmental historian Nancy Langston in her wonderful book on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in eastern Oregon, states clearly, “Any ecosystem is the product of its history, and that history includes cultural as well as social forces.”

However, too often environmental restoration and remediation treats landscape like a blank slate, “fixing” the past errors of human use, turning back the clock, and cutting off all connection to its previous history as a cultural landscape. It also implies the result of restoration is more natural, when in reality, it continues to be shaped and molded by humans to meet their own cultural goals and values.

Restoration projects in the Laguna de Santa Rosa highlight not only the interactions of people with nature and the possibility of ecological renewal, but also the ways in which restoration is

not a return to some primordial natural state, but a continuation of a series of human modifications of this re-shaped landscape, addressing present-day concerns, like the need for continued flood abatement while trying to undo ecological damage from past efforts to channelize and control the water flow.

The concepts of preservation and restoration are not always well matched with a recognition of the importance of history or continuing human presence in a natural landscape. Preservation is too firmly rooted in a notion of a timeless purity, the idea that a place or thing can be kept the same through time, unchanging in perpetuity. Similarly, the word “restoration” is a backward-facing concept, seeking to undo or reverse the passing of time and the inevitable impacts of human history on whatever resource is being restored — aiming to reshape places “back to” some more pure and essential state of being.

Unlike “preservation” and “restoration,” using the words “protection” or “rehabilitation” when discussing resource management projects does not contain underlying assumptions about the relationship between time and quality. These ideas allow human interactions to continue with the resource, acknowledging historical changes that may have occurred, or accommodating continued alteration or use, while responding to degradation and attempting to move the resource forward in a new, more ecologically sensitive direction.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa represents over 150 years of agricultural uses and modifications to the land, of urban development and changing cultural values about the environment. Yet, restoration of the creeks that feed into the Laguna do not represent a return to some wild state of nature; the landscape will remain very much a human creation, shaped to meet the changing of our needs and values. That in no way diminishes the efforts of restorationists to improve environmental quality and ecological function; it simply adds a layer of complexity, and reminds us of the layers of human stories and values these creeks and the landscape around them represent.

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