

# Beyond Preservation

by William Jordan III

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A good deal of effort has been expended in trying to preserve examples of the ecological communities that make up earth's splendid, many-colored coat. In fact, this effort has been a major theme of the environmental movement since the days of John Muir. That, of course, is as it should be. As philosophers of nature like Muir have repeatedly pointed out, undisturbed nature contains something of unique value and simply must be preserved, where it is still possible to do so. Yet at the same time, in a world of finite resources preservation alone is not enough—the natural areas that are intact are limited, and the enemy, who is us, is forever nibbling at the edges.

It seems likely, therefore, that intelligent earth stewardship is going to have to move beyond preservation to restoration. In short, we are going to have to learn to restore nature in far less time than nature takes to heal herself. Just as we have become terrifyingly adept at taking communities of plants and animals apart, so must we eventually become equally adept at putting them back together. Though human beings have been disassembling or disrupting ecosystems for one reason or another for thousands of years, only in very recent times have people begun to trouble themselves about restoring them.

Among the first institutions—as far as we know it was the very first—to apply itself seriously to restoring plant and animal communities was the University of Wisconsin Arboretum at Madison, where I have worked since 1977. The arboretum was established in 1934 on 500 acres of run-down farmland on the outskirts of the city. The arboretum property had been altered vastly since the time of settlement. If the arboretum was to become a reasonably complete collection of native Wisconsin ecological communities, many of these would

have to be brought into being on the site.

The Arboretum Committee's ambitious plans for the physical development of the arboretum were greatly facilitated by the Depression, which led to lowered land prices and the creation of a work force in the form of the Civilian Conservation Corps. In August of 1935 a CCC camp was established at the arboretum, the only camp in the country operating on a university campus. During the six years before it closed, a few weeks before Pearl Harbor, as many as 200 CCC boys were on site planting trees, dredging ponds, bringing in plants for prairie restoration—even putting back glacial boulders in fields from which they had been removed three quarters of a century earlier to make way for farming.

The Arboretum established prairie nursery beds and set up planting experiments. Seeds and plants were brought in by the truckload and put in place by hand. To nurture them through the droughty summers of the late thirties, CCC boys hauled in water from Lake Wingra in barrels, and carried it to the plants in milk cans.

The result of these efforts and the more modest ones of the years since is a collection of native ecological communities. The centerpiece of the collection is two restored tallgrass prairies, one of which, the sixty-acre Curtis Prairie, is thought to be the oldest restored prairie in the world. Other restored plant communities include several types of pine forest, examples of the two types of maple forest native to Wisconsin, and small samples of the spruce and fir forests of the far north. Together with oak forests and wetland communities that already existed on the site, these make up a complete collection of the major plant communities native to Wisconsin.

More and more, the restoration of ecologically degraded communities is being recognized as a necessity.

What is at stake—like it or not—is the future quality of millions of acres of land. Will these lands be restored to more or less faithful replicas of natural forests, prairies, and wetlands, or will they be something less? The answer will to some extent depend on the techniques we devise for making nature whole again, and on our success at creating political, social, an economic structures that encourage this approach to land stewardship.

The restorationist's effort to bring back native plant communities has broad economic and ecological implications for landscaping. When natives become the rule rather than the exception in landscaping, there will be automatic and enormous savings, not only in water and fertilizer, but also in energy, fuel, pesticides, and human labor. Restoration is also turning out to be useful as a means of raising questions and testing ideas about ecological communities and how they work.

Quite apart from the practical and intellectual benefits of recreating plant and animal communities, it seems to me that there is a kind of spiritual value in the act of restoration itself. As a healing art, restoration brings us closer to nature. It fosters humility, receptivity, attentiveness to the world around one.

There is a kind of reparation and salvation about it—a healing of people as well as the land. In his essay on St. Francis, G.K. Chesterton wrote that he saw the Dark Ages in Europe as a time of penance and atonement for the excesses of the classical world, and it seems to me that something similar may apply in the case of ecological restoration and the excesses of our exploitation of the land. There is, after all, something positively Benedictine in the devotion restoration requires, and in the hard, nurturing hand labor it demands. And there is surely plenty of need for reparation.