

Ecosystem Restoration: Is the Goal to Recover the Garden of Eden?

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Why is it important to restore an ecosystem? What values are being served? Answers to these questions may help to guide the efforts of practitioners. They may help in deciding what it means to "restore" an ecosystem. In many cases, there will be considerable ambiguity in this regard because in the past the ecosystem was continuously evolving. There is no well defined point in this evolution that can be said to represent "the" ecosystem.

How, then, can a target be determined as the goal of ecosystem restoration? Is it necessary to select some arbitrary stage of the evolution of the ecosystem and to declare that this stage is the true meaning of restoration? Or, are there criteria that can be offered to select among the various stages of evolution? For example, does restoration mean the recovery of the condition of the ecology that existed before the arrival of European civilization? Or could it possibly mean the ecological state that existed before the arrival of human beings in North America many thousands of years ago? Or perhaps it means the ecological conditions of about 100 years ago, which almost no one alive today could have witnessed.

It may also be that the values behind the goal of restoration will have important consequences for the method of restoration. To restore an ecosystem by active human efforts may be construed as the building of a new garden. Some people may regard the idea of a garden as incompatible with the true goals of ecosystem restoration. For them, the only acceptable way to restore the ecosystem may be to free nature from the impact of human actions -- and then to assume that the result will be to restore the natural conditions that preceded human assaults. Of course, the problem is that it may be impossible today to turn back in this fashion to an earlier natural stage.

Many interpreters have argued that the environmental movement not only asserts a new set of values but that these values are essentially religious in character. In this framework, one interpretation is that the desire to restore nature is a secular manifestation of the same impulse that earlier took the form of the desire to return to the Garden of Eden. The aim is to banish the influence of evil in the world -- which for secular environmental values may mean to recover a state of affairs that preceded the intrusions of modern industrial civilization. This paper will explore this thesis and what its practical implications might be for the ongoing efforts to restore ecological systems.