Restoration: What it is?

Bill Jordan III

There has been a lot of discussion about ‘restoration’, and how to define it in recent years, but it is important not to let all the talk confuse you. The idea of restoration is simple. The Webster’s Dictionary says that ‘to restore’ means ‘to bring back into existence or use,’ or ‘to put back into a former . . . state.’ So ‘ecological restoration’ means doing that to an ecological system such as a tallgrass prairie in Illinois or perhaps habitat for tigers and elephants in India. The idea is simple. The reason it generates so much discussion, and even argument, is that when you actually try to do restoration, you face a lot of questions. For one thing you have to decide what you are going to restore to, that is, what will be the model for your project? Then you have to decide how you are going to define the model, that is, exactly what features you are going to try to ‘bring back into existence’? And then you have to face up to the fact that, strictly speaking, restoration is impossible. We cannot ever put anything back exactly the way it was, and certainly not anything as complex as an ecosystem. This, however, does not mean that restoration is a silly idea, or a sentimental idea. In fact, as conservationists in many parts of the world have discovered, it has great value as a model, an ideal or a protocol for managing nature. What restorationists have learned over the past decade or so is that, though restoration may be impossible in the strictest sense, it is often quite possible to create a system that closely resembles an historic model in many respects. In fact, if you want to ensure the survival of ‘natural’ or historic landscapes over long periods of time, restoration offers the best chance of doing that. Another is the virtue of humility that is fostered by a restoration project unless it has three qualities:

1. Its goal is defined by an historic model.
2. The aim is to re-create that model as completely as possible. The resulting system should not only include all the species present in the model system, it should also function and behave like it.
3. The process is active and deliberate.

Of course, many projects do not meet these criteria. In fact, it is often impossible, impractical or even inappropriate even to try to meet them. When this is the case, the proper way to talk about a project is not to stretch the word ‘restoration’ to fit what you are doing. The proper way to talk about it is to say that it is not restoration in certain ways, and to call it what it really is. When a project is not modeled on an historic system, for example, then we should call it ‘agriculture’ or ‘forestry’ or ‘gardening,’ or, more vaguely, ‘stewardship’ or ‘management.’ ‘When the aim is to restore only certain features of a system, such as a rare species, or a hydrological feature, then we should call it ‘rehabilitation’ or ‘reclamation.’ ‘When the aim is to restore only certain features of a system, such as a rare species, or a hydrological feature, then we should call it ‘rehabilitation’ or ‘reclamation.’ ‘When the aim is to restore the health of the system, we can use the term ‘rehabilitation’ or ‘healing.’ And when the project is not active, and involves only removing a source of disturbance and letting the system recover, then we can call it ‘recovery.’ Some have argued that this strict definition is unrealistic in practice. Of course it is. It defines an ideal. But that ideal is important, and it is important to protect it by using language carefully when talking about it. Others have said that restoration is a peculiarly American or New World idea, and that it is not useful in Old World countries like India that have long and complex land-use histo-
ries. This concern, however, rests on the idea that 'restoration' is about the re-creation of 'nature' or 'natural' ecosystems. As I have defined it, restoration is not aimed at the creation of 'natural' landscapes, but at the re-creation of historic landscapes, whether these have been influenced by human activities or not. I am thinking, for example, of the efforts to restore the vegetation at Buddhist shrines in India. These are excellent examples of restoration projects in the strict sense of the word. Understood this way, the idea of restoration is as useful to conservationists in Old World countries like India as in New World countries like the United States or Mexico.