Restoration and Reclamation Review
Student On-Line Journal
Vol.3, No.5, Spring 1998
Department of Horticultural Science
University of Minnesota, St.Paul, MN

Overview of Vol.3, No.5 - Community Restoration Efforts

Joseph Flood

The Past Preserves our Future

Although adequate funding, planning, and available technical expertise is often lacking in community based restoration programs, this hasn't prevented the cooperative spirit that draws a vast number of environmentally conscientious people together to restore impacted areas. Prior to settlement in the United States, there was a vast wilderness with its intact mountainous regions, river systems and endless prairies. As our technology has advanced, our human population has increased, leaving few remaining vestiges of intact ecosystems. Over time, we have reconciled and realized our responsibility as good stewards, and have begun to restore some of the last remaining natural places.

The majestic feelings about untrammeled landscapes have captured the imagination, dreams, and cooperative spirit of many individuals and groups who have come together to restore vast areas of impacted landscapes. This collective spirit provides the partnerships to see our dreams of restoring biological diversity come to fruition. Miersch's Circle of Fight article clearly demonstrates how important cooperation is to successful restoration programs. The tribal wetlands restoration program embodies a holistic approach to resource management. With the guidance from many scientists, our knowledge to recreate the foundations for biological diversity is beginning to happen.

The 1990's have brought about an awareness that was missing from our collective consciousness. That is, how can we rebuild a vanishing part of our ecological history, and make enriching connections to the native plants and animals, that over millennia, evolved into diverse symbiotic relationships? We're only now beginning to appreciate and understand these tightly linked relationships.

Effective Community Restoration Programs

Key elements making community based restoration programs effective are the inclusivity of their parameters. Programs experiencing successful restoration are those having strong community support, have well developed short and long term objectives, clearly stated implementation schedules, and monitoring strategies. Carefully conducted research establishes an understanding of the importance of ecosystem characteristics, landscape function and the needs of diverse species. A comprehensive approach to managing ecosystems, allows for a more detailed assessment of the function of an area, and the potential solutions necessary to reestablish ecological processes on a landscape scale. Planning, designing, implementing and monitoring restoration programs are all parts of effective restoration. What successful restorations need more than anything is continued recognition of the importance of natural areas, and the continued support for these precious tracts from surrounding communities.

Providing Public Information and Education

Effective restoration programs provide public information and education about good stewardship practices that encourage people to reconnect with the land. An effective way to plant the seeds of future investment is through cooperative restoration programs with school aged children. McCullough's article on the School Nature Area Project (SNAP) demonstrates an interesting way for students to understand the importance of natural systems. When student's participate in restoration, they become our long term investors to carry on the "natural area" legacy. Educating the public about the benefits of restoration is the glue that binds the cooperative spirit needed to restore damaged ecosystems back to healthy functioning ones.

It Takes More Than Funding

Funding is often stated as the primary limiting factor to successful restoration. Successful programs possess a sense of creativity, strong insightful leadership, well-planned strategies, and evaluation protocols. In Friborg's article on Restoration of Urban Parks, Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board demonstrate an exemplar program. Their ability to creatively plan and implement restoration programs brings together as many players as possible to support the restoration efforts and encourage a sense of ownership. Often people involved in restoration assume that restoring an area back to a native ecosystem is a one time operation. Many of these programs have created long-term opportunities for public involvement in their restoration programs. Successful restoration projects include a continuing maintenance and monitoring schedule. This scheduling plan is developed and followed to ensure a healthy system thrives into perpetuity. The factors that most often limit a program's success are: inadequate public involvement, lack specific short and long term goals, and failure to have a vision for the area's future.

Volunteers: an investment of time and commitment

Volunteering provides opportunities for people to learn more about the natural environment. Volunteers see their overall purpose as protecting and preserving nature, restoring part of natural landscape to its original condition, and helping nature survive the invasion of weeds and human interference. Volunteerism provides people with the power to achieve great things. The challenge is to maintain ongoing support for the project in the community. Volunteers need to see and feel success. Their reward is seeing their efforts flourish. The SNAP program has been very effective in pooling together a cadre of individuals from higher education and the community who make the program very rewarding for the students. Managers of volunteer programs need to carefully consider the size of an initial project, and build a program that addressees ecological needs and considers providing demonstration sites for public observations.

Effective programs are built around good planning, background research, community involvement, student participation, and long term monitoring. Restoration leaders need to provide clear directions and specific tasks to keep everyone actively engaged. Volunteers need to know they are an essential part of the solution. By providing training to volunteers, they go away with a better understanding of the project, the long-term goals, and how their efforts are incorporated into the long range plans for a restoration program. People who volunteer are proud to share their experience with others in the community.

The Rebirth of a Landscape

Excitement abounds in the once dull industrial areas of our largest cities. Large tracts of once considered waste lands, "where gravel-covered lots thrived", are now symbols of a thriving natural prairies filled with the hope and inspiration for revitalizing our industrial areas and river corridors. Beautifying the least cared about pockets of isolated landscapes is bringing life back to these areas, and providing important habitats for migratory birds who have been bypassing these areas for decades.

Restoration provides the hope that we can make a difference, but everyone's help is needed to make it happen. By establishing clearly stated ecological goals in their restoration programs, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board provide a vision for other restoration programs to emulate. Attaining ecological goals improves water quality, creates and enhances existing habitats, while protecting shorelines from erosion and reducing park maintenance costs.

Stewardship Programs Build a Land Ethic

Private land owners are encouraged to participate in restoration and habitat enhancement programs through forest stewardship incentives that assist landowners to better utilize their private land resources while providing a benefit to the public. Providing training for private landowners to develop long-term goals for their land is the hallmark of Cathy Comb's article on Stewardship Incentive Programs. This program offers the landowner a wonderful opportunity to better understand the ecological potential of their property and how to best utilize all its' resources. The stewardship program provides essential training, technical support, and stewardship role models for others to emulate. The stewardship program helps owners understand the principles behind ecosystem-based land management, while making their lands more productive and secure habitat for wildlife.

Biodiversity is the Key

Prairies symbolize the mystery and joy behind restoration efforts in the midwestern savanna region. The goal of biodiversity brings rewards when the restored ecosystems provide rich habitats for returning species that were temporarily displaced. Both Scherer's article on Prairie Restoration Within a Nuclear Accelerator Ring and Bramstedts' South Florida Ecosystem Restoration project demonstrate the amount of organization, logistics and challenge that involve programs on a landscape scale. Their ability to demonstrate effective planning and implementation are life long endeavors and should continue to draw our attention for years to come. Many of these programs allow for a comprehensive planting mix, that offers a well-blended vegetative cover and diversity of species. When native plants are reestablished, they create a biodiversity of habitats, setting the stage for animals to thrive. Creating biodiversity is the hallmark for restoration!

Restoring Our Future

Communities across the country are stepping forward to rebuild and restore vast tracts of land that have been impacted since the presettlement period. Our future demands an understanding of

our past and how we can reconnect the "circle of life". Restoring native landscapes is one avenue for our hopes and dreams to connect; where native plants flourish and animals can redefine their homes. Since the wind has moved the tall grass prairies, a multitude of species from the butterflies, grizzlies and the buffalo once called "this place" their home.