



Overview of Vol.3, No.3 - Regional Restoration Planning

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Degradation of the environment around us occurs on all levels. Restoration efforts range in intent from the site-specific chemical spill to international problems such as acid rain. This chapter describes restoration programs that concentrate on the broader end of the spectrum: regionally based restoration planning. The restoration programs in this chapter vary in ecosystem type from the arid west to the aquatic systems of estuaries, the Mississippi River, and the Great Lakes. The program to restore damaged watersheds in the Southern Rocky Mountains (Lang) is an interesting blend of arid and aquatic ecosystem problems.

As with almost all restoration programs, the programs described in this chapter experience to some degree an uncertainty in funding along with a dependence on volunteers or public participation. For instance, in Lori Biederman's paper about the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) restoration efforts, the public's concern and criticism has been a primary catalyst in a shift toward more emphasis on native plant species and community parameters. Bruce Carlson, in his assessment of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' (Army Corps) Environmental Management Program (EMP), notes that the extent of monitoring for completed projects is limited by high costs. The Southern Rockies Restoration Project (SRRP), described by Holly Lang, expressly considers community-based groups to be the most effective approach to watershed restoration. The SRRP conducts workshops open to the public as a means of teaching watershed health assessment and treatment skills. By doing so, the SRRP is able to demonstrate to community members the importance of a healthy watershed and hopefully create a greater sense of problem ownership within the community. Creating that sense of ownership within a community will undoubtedly enhance the chances for restoration success.

Lack of monitoring is also a difficulty encountered in almost every restoration program. Ingrid Weinbauer describes how there is a complete lack of data collection in the Great Lakes National Program Office (GLNPO). The same can be said of the SRRP. Meanwhile, the National Estuary Program (NEP) requires the inclusion of a monitoring program as part of every estuary management plan, as noted by Laura Perry. Those NEP monitoring programs set quantifiable goals that allow for distinctions to be made between successful and failed management plans.

Beyond these typical characteristics of restoration programs, the regional programs in this chapter contain in them a common element of compromise. One form of compromise occurs in site or program selection when a trade-off is made between the ecological importance and economic or political feasibility of a program. This is the case with the SRRP and NEP, where large numbers of stakeholders, each with varying interests, are involved in the program. In the GLNPO and NEP, the fear of spreading resources too thin causes the programs to select only those projects that can accomplish the goals of the program with minimal risk. Another form of compromise is the extent to which the ecological goals of a restoration intrude on other human economic goals. The Mississippi River has historically been a major source of commerce for the Upper Midwest. The EMP must consider not only the ecological impact of a restoration, but also its local and regional economic effects. The same can be said for the BLM's restoration program.

Much of the restoration activities in the arid west are occurring on land once used for grazing. To what extent a restoration will focus on ecological factors versus functional factors and how much those factors mesh becomes an important question to ranchers who rely on the quality of those rangelands for a living.

As noted from the beginning of this summary, these programs are all based on regional problems. However, when actual restorations are performed, they do not occur on that level. Restorations occur on a site-specific basis. How then does a regionally based organization ensure that its objectives are being met on site? The answer to that question depends largely on the structure of an organization.

The BLM and EMP programs are at a distinct advantage in regard to organizational structure. Both the BLM and the Army Corps have highly organized systems of regional, state, and local field offices that allow for the consistent transmission of goals and objectives from the top down. Meanwhile the NEP, GLNPO, and SRRP lack that organizational structure. Instead, these programs act as distributors of funds. They depend on individual organizations coming to them for grant money, so there tends to be a lack of consistency not only in restoration goals, but also in methodologies. The NEP and SRRP work around this flaw with a commitment to including as many stakeholders from the community as possible when creating a restoration effort. As mentioned before, the SRRP also conducts public workshops enabling citizens to learn why and how the restoration is being performed. By teaching methods to those people directly affected by the restoration, two objectives are accomplished: the number of potential workers is increased and in so doing, the chances for a successful restoration increase. The certainty of success increases because a sense of ownership is given to the community. However, the problem is that despite the increased chance of on-site success, no guarantee is given that the outcome will match the goals of the larger program.

This difference in mode of operation created by organizational structure offers some insights into what could make all of the regional programs in this chapter more effective. The BLM program and the EMP could try to incorporate the neighboring communities into their restoration efforts, allowing the people most affected by the restoration to become a part of the long-term effort. This would provide an answer to criticism that government agencies fail to maintain interest in a project after its initial mission has been completed. By the same token, programs like SRRP, NEP, and GLNPO could try to create a stronger regional-to-restoration site coordination. The larger goals could be met while at the same time the restoration meets the needs of individual communities.