

The Chicago Wilderness and its Critics

III. The Other Side

*A Survey of the Arguments*by Paul H. Gobster¹

A close look at the
debate reveals
differences in values,
gaps in
communication—
and grounds for
collaboration.

Long viewed as a center of ecological restoration activity, over the past year the Chicago region has also gained notoriety as a center of ecological restoration controversy. After years of operating in relative obscurity, public agencies and private groups engaged in restoring metropolitan forest preserve sites have now drawn considerable attention from the press and some individuals and groups. While much of this attention has been positive, opposition to restoration has been so effective that, at the time of this writing, partial moratoriums on restoration activity have been imposed in two of the county forest preserve districts in the metropolitan area, pending further analysis of the issues by their boards of commissioners (see preceding story by Debra Shore).

This opposition and the resulting moratoriums have surprised and angered many restoration proponents. Restorationists, many of whom are volunteers, often see their work as an altruistic effort to heal the earth (Schroeder, in press). Who would oppose such dedicated service, especially when provided at minimal cost to taxpayers? Recent newspaper articles and editorials, public meetings, and other forums have provided valuable information about each side's views. However, much of this information has been delivered and received in such an emotionally charged atmosphere that real communication has been difficult.

As a social scientist with a long interest in and appreciation of the restoration movement, I felt it would be useful to try to take a dispassionate look at the opposi-

tion's viewpoints in this controversy. Are opponents objecting to management of the natural areas in Chicago's forest preserves in general, or only to specific practices? What values do they hold that are being threatened by restoration efforts? To what extent does the way people respond to restoration depend on its context and the way it is carried out? Answers to these and other, similar, questions are important if land managers and restoration groups are to realize restoration goals within the broader context of society's goals for management of public lands.

As a step toward answering these questions, in the fall of 1996 I undertook a survey to examine the opposition to ecological restoration in the forest preserves of the Chicago area. What I found, in short, was that opposition was far from absolute, and that there was a good deal of common ground between those who have been labeled "opponents" and those who have been labeled "proponents" of restoration. In this paper I identify some major issues and values expressed in opposition to ecological restoration in the Chicago region and suggest some ways that conflicts might be addressed. My purpose is not to argue for either side, but to provide a basis for understanding and working with those who may have different views. The controversy in Chicago provides a timely opportunity for doing this, and although my findings may not apply directly to other places, it is likely that some of the lessons learned here can be useful elsewhere, especially where restoration is being carried out in urban areas.

My analysis relies on secondary data sources: newspapers and other materials dealing with the restoration controversy. These sources can suffer from bias and selectivity, but if used carefully can provide valuable insights into a problem and suggest directions for further inquiry. With this in mind, I began to collect local newspaper articles and editorials dealing with the opposition to ecological restoration. I also compiled transcripts from public hearings and radio interviews on the topic, and examined newsletter articles and fact sheets from organized groups on both sides of the controversy. I assembled more than 100 different accounts in all, most of which centered on restoration of tallgrass prairie, oak savanna, and oak woodland on forest-preserve sites in Cook and DuPage Counties.² The accounts included a wide range of sources, including private individuals (especially residents living near restoration sites), elected officials, representatives of community associations and environmental groups, newspaper editorials and columns, and newsletters and fact sheets.

I read these materials carefully and extracted the principal *issues* expressed by opposing groups and individuals, either directly in hearing statements or direct quotes in newspapers, or indirectly as paraphrased by those reporting them. These

issues, I soon realized, included restoration *practices*, as well as issues relating to the *process* and *context* of restoration—that is, not so much what was being done but how and where it was being done. Finally, I attempted to identify or infer some of the important *values* that underlie these issues. Although this is difficult to do with secondary data, I felt it was essential to look beyond the rhetoric to the deeper reasons behind the issues.

It is important to note that these findings in many cases may not match the situation as seen by restorationists. Restorationists, for example, have documented their extensive efforts in tree planting, public outreach and involvement, and other activities (see accompanying article by Laurel Ross) to counter opponents' claims. My concern here is not the effectiveness of their efforts, but the perceptions and feelings of opponents. Whether well founded or not, these beliefs are an important reality to contend with because they help drive public policy and decision making regarding restoration.

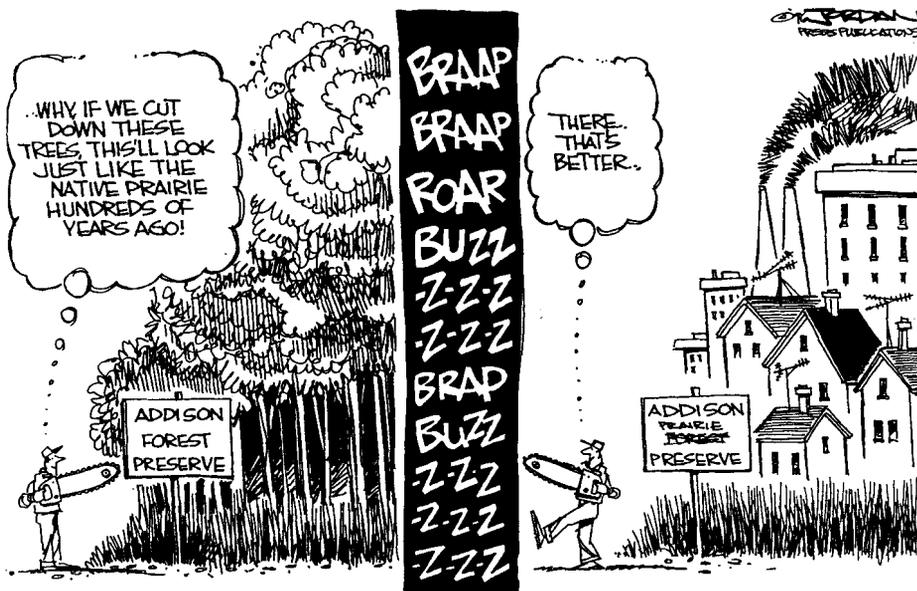
What follows is a summary of the major issues and values expressed by those critical of restoration. Because the summary lacks the immediacy of what individuals are actually saying, I've included a few quotes in the accompanying box to give

the reader a better feeling for the depth of these issues and values, as well as the strength of people's emotions.

Practice-Related Issues

I found little wholesale opposition to restoration. Indeed, groups and individuals critical of restoration often expressed an appreciation of restoration at certain sites. In general, their objections had less to do with restoration or the idea of restoration than with specific practices used to restore ecological communities:

- **Removal of trees and brush.** This issue received the most comments, and for many was the chief issue. People decried killing healthy trees by cutting, girdling, applying herbicide, and burning, and they mentioned places where numerous trees had been removed, leaving an open, "barren" landscape. Some felt tree removal was at odds with the purpose of the forest preserves and the whole idea of "restoration." The most strongly negative comments were about the removal of large trees; some said the appearance of their neighborhood or favorite recreation area had been devastated by the removal of mature trees, and that it would take many decades to replace such trees. Some derided the cutting of younger trees as well, claiming that restorationists labeled these as "brush" to avoid public scrutiny. Others saw the need to remove invasive trees such as buckthorn, but felt that restorationists had gone too far in removing species that some considered a natural or legitimate part of the landscape.
- **Applying herbicide.** Apart from the fact that herbicides killed vegetation, people voiced additional concerns about the use of herbicides in restorations. Specifically, they expressed concern about which herbicides were being used; how, when, and at what strength they were applied; and the qualifications of those who applied them. Some felt not enough was known about the effects on humans of the herbicides now being used, or feared that deleterious effects might be found later.
- **Burning.** Many concerns over prescribed fire related to its use in the metropolitan area. Some felt burning re-



A cartoon that ran in a Chicago-area paper in November, 1996, indicates the intensity of controversy surrounding restoration programs. Drawing by Jim Jordan/Press Publications, Elmhurst, IL

duced air quality in a region already polluted by industry and auto emissions. Some living near restoration sites feared that fires would get out of control and damage their property; others asked why restorationists could burn prairies when homeowners are prohibited from burning yard waste. Wildlife was of particular concern, and two wildlife and birding enthusiasts stressed that spring burning can kill young animals and disrupt nesting birds.

- **Removal of deer.** Deer removal, often seen as a necessary part of ecological restoration in the Midwest, has been carried out in the Chicago forest preserves for some years. Despite high emotions over deer killing, few voiced concerns about this in the materials I reviewed. One animal-rights group objected to using rocket nets, but not to sharp-shooting. The group did feel, however, that the killing of deer to protect new restoration plantings was unjust.

Process- and Context-Related Issues

Alongside concerns about what kinds of restoration practices were taking place, the accounts showed an equally strong sentiment about how and where restoration was being carried out:

- **Public information.** A major concern was a perceived lack of public information about planned and ongoing restoration activities. Residents, community-association representatives, and elected officials claimed they had been left "out of the loop," and thus were surprised when major alterations occurred. As stakeholders, they felt they should have been apprised of activities, even if they were not directly involved in decision making. Some also felt agencies and volunteer restorationists had concealed activities or withheld information to avoid opposition; often quoted as proof of this was a passage from the book *Miracle Under the Oaks* (Stevens, 1995) describing how a group of area volunteers left brush screens and girdled trees below the vegetation line to hide activities. Others said they had been assured by restorationists that mature trees would not be

removed but later found such trees had been cut down or girdled.

- **Public involvement in decision making.** Along with the desire to know more about what was going on, some individuals and groups felt they had not had an opportunity to participate in restoration planning, and wanted a greater say in decisions about the conduct of restoration activities. Several said that because most activity was conducted on public lands, as taxpayers they should have a right to say how those lands should be managed. Some who live near restoration sites felt they had more at stake in land-management decisions than others, and that for this reason their concerns should be given extra weight.
- **Planning for restoration.** Many felt there was a lack of planning for restoration. Some said the plans they had seen or heard of lacked important information about how restoration was to be implemented at a particular site; others felt that planning was being done on an *ad hoc* basis without a vision of what was going to be accomplished over the long term. A second concern was the selection of sites for restoration projects. Many wanted areas restored, but not where it would impact them personally or the existing forested environment directly. Some did not think it was appropriate to conduct restoration near their homes; others felt it was better to do it outside of the metropolitan area altogether. Many said the best place to do restoration was on open, vacant land and farm land, especially land owned by private individuals and groups. Wherever the land was, many voiced opposition to restoration of prairie or savanna on land that now had trees on it.
- **Who's in control?** Because of the strong role that volunteer groups have played at many of the restoration sites in the area, some questioned who was responsible for planning and authorizing restoration activities such as cutting, burning, and applying herbicides. Some felt there was not enough oversight and communication from public agencies to prevent volunteers from overcutting trees. Others wondered why land management had apparently been relegated to volunteers who were not profession-

ally trained in restoration. And a few alleged that restorationists as a private group had taken *de facto* control over the public forest preserves and were steering management to fulfill their own agenda.

Values

Opposition to restoration can be more than a simple dislike for a specific practice or procedure; it may be tied to more deeply held feelings. Many of these feelings I identified relate to the values that urban nature—and trees in particular—have in people's lives. I grouped these values into the following categories:

- **Functional values.** People cited a number of functional values they felt were diminished through the removal of trees and other restoration activities. One was *environmental quality*. Some claimed trees provided more oxygen and filtered more pollutants from the air than prairie grasses, and that burning to restore grasslands increased air pollution. Another was the *privacy and solitude* trees provide by buffering urban sights and sounds; many of the comments on this point came from those who live near restoration sites where the removal of vegetation has exposed buildings or roads formerly screened from view. (This perspective is clearly expressed in the accompanying editorial cartoon, which appeared in a local paper at the height of the controversy in November, 1996.) A third was *shade and cooling*, many people pointing out that the tree canopy was one of the prime attributes of the forest preserves, where many go for relief on hot summer days.
- **Economic values.** People also mentioned various economic reasons for keeping restoration sites the way they were. Residents of one Cook County neighborhood felt that a main attraction of their neighborhood was its forested character, and that cutting trees in the adjacent forest preserves would decrease their property values. In DuPage County, others saw the Forest Preserve District's 10-year, \$11.6 million restoration program as a burden to taxpayers when the district should be focusing its efforts on land acquisition for recreation and conservation purposes.

- **Recreation and wildlife values.** Some felt restoration was reducing the values of the forest preserves for recreation. One resident said her grandchildren lost a favorite play space when the woods across from her house were cut down. A

bicyclist said her outings on a forest preserve trail were hotter and less enjoyable after shade trees along it had been removed. Some birders felt that birding was being compromised by restorationists removing valuable tree and brush

habitat. Another mentioned that people's opportunities to see deer would decrease if deer removal continued.

- **Aesthetic values.** Many people said they liked the beauty of the trees and the preserves' wooded character, and felt restoration forced a different aesthetic on a public that appreciates things the way they are. One resident said the natural beauty of the unmanaged forest was being replaced by a beauty that was more manipulated and manicured, like one would find in a garden.
- **Symbolic values.** For some, restoration goals and practices conflicted with their values in nature and what it symbolized. One important value was the value of *nature uncontrolled* by humans. Some saw restoration as an attempt to control nature instead of allowing it to follow its own course. The desire for uncontrolled nature was seen as a more *populist* idea of nature. Restoration, in contrast, was seen as elitist, and the idea of returning nature to the pre-settlement period of the 1830s was seen as arbitrary and out of line with the ideals of the common person. The idea that nature should be left to take its course was also expressed as the idea that *all species have value*, whether they are considered natural or not. Some questioned the distinction between native and non-native, and suggested that species considered non-native have a right to exist, especially if they have long been established on a site. Most saw a need to control some types of invasive non-natives, but some said the restorationists were defining "native" too narrowly.

The Criticism A Selection of Quotes

"I'm not as opposed to cutting some of the buckthorns, because typically buckthorn are very small in diameter. I'm more concerned with the lindens, the 18-inch, the 20-inch in diameter lindens that they've cut down . . . " (Individual in a radio interview)

"To evade criticism from those who might not subscribe to the idea of deforesting a Forest Preserve, the restorationists describe what they cut as mostly 'brush.'" (Newspaper columnist)

"You may recall that 20 years ago everybody thought DDT and Agent Orange weren't harmful to people, and in the next 20 years we found a lot of data contrary to that. I don't want to find that Garlon 1, 2, 3, and 4 have deleterious effects on my children's health 20 years from now." (Nearby resident at an informational forum)

"We have burns and brush cutting going on during prime nesting season. . . . [The recent decline in bird species at several forest preserve sites] is the direct result of restoration." (Individual at an informational forum)

"When the owners and the communities of the areas abutting these areas don't know what's going on, then something's wrong." (Nearby resident, in a news article)

"We need an opportunity to participate in the process." (Nearby resident, in a news article)

"If a savanna consists of anywhere from 10-80 percent trees . . . , what is it going to be on the plan? . . . is it going to be 10 percent trees or is it going to be 80 percent trees? Let's get spe-

cific." (Community association representative at a hearing)

"The Forest Preserves are all public lands, of course, for which taxpayers foot the bill. But one of the most curious aspects about the way these public properties are being managed is the degree to which the official management has turned its job over to amateur restorationists . . . " (Newspaper columnist)

"[One commissioner] took staff to task for having 'poor political judgment' in eliminating the visual and audio buffer from Belleau Woods' neighbors. 'That was the biggest error you could have made,' [he] said." (News article)

"How is this program going to impact my property values as a homeowner and my ability to enjoy the surroundings of where I live?" (Nearby resident at a hearing)

"I'm a birder, and I know this is affecting the bird population. My concern is that we're doing major alterations of the environment without really knowing how it will affect such things as the bird population." (Individual at an informational forum)

"This is an egotistical type of ideology that these forest preserves cannot take care of themselves." (Nearby resident, in a news article)

"We should remember that everybody is bringing their own particular aesthetic about what our environment should look like into this, and none of them are necessarily more right or wrong." (Community association representative at a hearing)

Implications for Restoration Programs

In looking at the arguments against ecological restoration in metropolitan Chicago reported in the media and other materials, I found that many—though not all—of the concerns expressed focused on specific issues related to the practice, process, and context of restoration, rather than on the idea of restoration itself. This is good news for restorationists, for it is likely that by addressing these issues, they might alleviate some of people's concerns.

In an earlier paper in *Restoration and Management Notes* (Gobster, 1994), I suggested how restoration could be made more sensitive to public concerns. In the sections below, I revisit these ideas in light of the issues and concerns identified here.

■ **Plan for restoration in a landscape context.** Restoration programs can be improved by integrating sites into the larger landscape context. Landscape-planning systems such as the USDA Forest Service's Scenery Management System (1996) can be adapted to help in planning the location and extent of restoration activities. In urban forest preserves, for example, areas near homes, picnic groves, recreational trails, and other highly used or visible areas might be managed relatively conservatively, and restorations in these areas might be small in scale and implemented in such a way as to minimize visual disruption. This might involve alternative methods, such as mowing instead of burning, or leaving non-invasive non-native trees to live out their days. More intensive or larger scale restorations could take place in more remote areas.

■ **Design restoration sites with people in mind.** Many people were critical of restoration because the results, often involving drastic changes in the landscape, conflicted with their expectations of beauty or naturalness. In some cases, better design can help reveal the beauty and intent of restorations that might otherwise seem messy and neglected (Nassauer, 1995). Mowed edges, the planting of showy native perennials and interesting trees at key locations, fencing, and other design devices can improve the appearance of restorations. This more user-friendly approach to restoration may help speed the development of an appreciation for grassland ecosystems among the public (Thayer, 1994), while at the same time provide a pro-active—and more straightforward—alternative to the practice of leaving fringes of brush to screen restoration activities.

■ **Promote two-way communication.** Information can help "sell" restoration, and efforts by Chicago-area restorationists to get the word out through feature

stories in the major newspapers and through a strong communications network among volunteer restorationists have worked well in reaching many groups and individuals. In addition to these ways, my findings suggest that information targeted at the neighborhood level could be useful. Talks to neighborhood groups, stories contributed to neighborhood newspapers, fliers distributed door-to-door, and regular visits with community representatives can help fill communication gaps. Signs and guided tours of restoration sites are other important ways to tell people what is happening. To lessen surprises, residents should be told about major activities in an area *before* they take place. Equally important is a willingness to listen to alternative views. While education can fill knowledge gaps and correct misperceptions, this study showed that people have values in nature that go beyond considerations such as biodiversity or historic authenticity, and that these values may not change in response to any amount of ecological or historic information. This makes it essential that communication be a two-way process.

■ **Encourage involvement.** While values may not always change in response to information, they often do change in response to experience. Indeed, several supporters at the Chicago restoration hearings spoke of how they had initially been turned off by what they heard about and saw until they experienced a restoration site close up, especially through hands-on activity. Seed collecting and tree planting are two uncontroversial activities that can engage newcomers, and can be tied to seasonal celebrations of interest to the general public. The results of my survey clearly show that public groups and individuals desire greater involvement in restoration planning and decision making, and it seems likely that this could in some cases also lead to involvement in the actual work of restoration—and hence to changes in views. To be effective, this involvement should begin at the early stages of planning. Including a wider range of groups in the planning process can lengthen planning time and sometimes modify outcomes, but it often

speeds up implementation and management in the long run.

Integration of Values

While my purpose in this paper was to examine the views of those critical of the restoration effort in metropolitan Chicago, my results also suggest that "opponents" and "proponents" have more in common than one might think. Both share a strong concern for the protection of nature in the forest preserves, and even the most vocal opponents have an appreciation for biologically diverse ecosystems and the need for some types of management. In some cases, the issue is not so much whether restoration should proceed, but rather how, where, and to what extent.

The values people hold for nature are diverse and, as this study shows, may not always be compatible. This may be especially true in an urban setting, where the population is culturally diverse and where natural areas take on special importance because they are highly visible, heavily used or intensely appreciated, and limited in extent. Some might argue that biodiversity is a higher value and therefore should receive higher priority in public-land management; indeed, in one article I examined a restorationist is quoted as saying: "Human values and personal preferences such as 'I like blue flowers' should not compromise the integrity of the [restoration] program" (Maughan, 1996). For many who view restoration critically, however, removing trees to promote biodiversity is no less human a value than preserving trees to maintain air quality or provide visual screening. Instead of arguing whose values are better, perhaps a more constructive way to proceed is to respect the legitimacy of these multiple values and work together to integrate them in order to achieve the common goal of protecting nature.

ENDNOTES

1. A longer version of this paper was presented at the 23rd Natural Areas, 15th North American Prairie, and Indiana Dunes Ecosystems Conferences, St. Charles, IL, October 23-26, 1996.
2. A full listing of these sources is available from the author.

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