Rhetoric of Hope: Ecological Restoration for a Troubled Planet

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Abstract

When exposed to environmental rhetoric, it is easy to feel hopeless. With experts regularly claiming that our CO2 levels have crossed the 'point of no return,' it is no surprise that traditional and multimodal texts choose to focus on issues such as the destruction of wilderness, overpopulation, loss of biodiversity, invasive species, pollution, drought, hunger, and 'no-longer-natural' disasters. Such information, perhaps understandably, stymies the catalyst for change and leads many to feelings of impotency and despair. In this article, however, we argue that fear-based rhetoric is a flawed model in environmental communication. Instead, we introduce the field of ecological restoration and illustrate its principles and practices through related, narrative-based literature. Accordingly, we show that ecological restoration, concentrating on real solutions at the local level, presents a message of both environmental and cultural hope. By focusing on positive, actionable steps, we demonstrate that ecological restoration encourages public involvement and promotes a sense of empowerment. This approach shifts the narrative from despair to hope, demonstrating that collective action can make a significant difference. We conclude by arguing that ecological restoration's rhetoric is effective in addressing current environmental degradation, denial, and despair, providing a hopeful and actionable path forward.

Keywords: *Environmental Rhetoric, Ecological Restoration, Fear-Based Communication, Public Involvement, Cultural Hope.*

Introduction

A Rhetoric of Hope: Ecological Restoration for a Troubled Planet

Many people, despite being lifelong advocates for environmental health and preservation, find themselves withdrawing from environmentally oriented texts, including news, articles, social media, films, and events. One possible explanation for this trend is a growing distrust in corporations and national governments to invest in environmentally healthy policies and practices when doing so would conflict with their personal gains. On this note, Pew Research found that people distrust climate information by national news media because it is colored by politics and research funders (Pasquini et al., 2023). For many consumers of environmental communication, this begs the question: why trust and, accordingly, consume information from people who have agendas extending outside of environmental health?

Another possible explanation for public withdrawal is not a lack of environmental concern but, rather, the opposite. According to research, as awareness of climate change has increased, so have feelings of "anxiety, grief, despair, and depression," leading to a condition known as "eco-anxiety" (Gibbens, 2023). Illustrating the extent of this condition, based upon a 2021 survey of 10,000 sixteen to twenty-five year olds, environmental-related anxiety has become prevalent with 60% of responders reporting being either "very worried" or "extremely worried" (Thompson, 2021). And while one might think that anxiety should be a catalyst for engagement, because news, social media, film, and environmental writing generally focus upon macro scale environmental threats—as well as ignoring interventions detailing positive impact projects— hope and individual agency often feel nonexistent. Therefore, it is not surprising that, as social scientists note, many people will "avoid learning important information—especially about complex topics—if it causes them anxiety or other psychological discomfort" (Haltinner & Sarathchandra, 4). For many global

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citizens, this begs the question: why engage with environmental concerns when they are terrifying and individuals have no agency to affect change?

The authors of this paper, three writing teachers, faced similar misgivings. Despite over a decade of exploring environmentally themed texts and writing practices within the composition classroom, we found ourselves moving in different pedagogical directions. This migration wasn't a lack of interest or concern with environmentally themed rhetoric. Rather, it reflected a growing discomfort with introducing language and literature into the classroom that often depressed and/or disengaged students due to the frightening nature of the information contained within the texts. As one first-year student put it, "If our planet is past the tipping point and we're all screwed, then what's the point?" And, truth be told, it is hard to blame him for this sentiment. Afterall, despite the obvious dangers facing the planet, environmental restrictions continue to remain conspicuously weak or absent, corporations continue to dump waste into the air and water, people continue to over consume resources, and essential biodiversity continues to be eradicated to make space for whichever crop yields the highest short-term profit—in other words, business as usual. Ultimately, we were left wondering if there were ways to engage with environmental texts without diving into despair and lack of agency. Our students needed hope. We needed hope.

Our search for this hope began with a few basic questions. First, if the majority of environmental texts being introduced to students seemed to result in lack of engagement due to their macroscale focus (e.g. climate change, great garbage patch, etc.) and macroscale management (e.g. big government, corporations, etc.), then what type of environmental texts would speak to microscale issues (local environment) with microscale management/control (e.g. local government, small businesses, community activism)? Finally, what type of environmental practices and literature might provide opportunities for everyday citizens (such as our students) to become involved?

These questions eventually led us to the field of ecological restoration, a practice with the power to foster both environmental and cultural hope. Accordingly, as a means for exploring the principles and practices of ecological restoration, this paper makes three moves. It begins with a critical examination of contemporary communicative practices of environmental risk and disaster in order to establish exigency for alternative approaches to environmental communication. Next, it explores various approaches to ecological restoration and how they have been applied through environmental literature. To conclude, it makes the argument that the practice and language of ecological restoration provides hope and healing as opposed to despair and should, therefore, be promoted in environmental rhetoric.

Why is Fear-based Rhetoric a Faulty Model?

"Acting and reacting from a place of fear of the future will only lead to the worst of our collective mistakes of the past. I am not being naïve about earth changes and oil—I just don't see the point of fearing the future, because you can never make good decisions based on fear" (Santoya, 58)

Media Tactics Lead to Desensitization

One of the reasons why fear-based rhetoric is a faulty communicative practice is because media tactics are familiar to audiences and, as a result, audiences question the veracity of the information. What are the tactics being used? O'Neill and Nicolson-Cole (2009) investigate visual and iconic representations of climate change on public engagement and make the following arguments: (1) the 'wicked' nature of climate change makes it impersonal and distant; (2) it is not possible to deterministically correlate specific climatic events with anthropogenic climatic change since people (especially government and corporate entities) want to avoid accusations of culpability; (3) long-term campaigns that appeal to fear-based rhetoric run the risk of desensitizing audiences; (4) the overuse of fear-based appeals may result in a lack of trust in the communicating organization; and (5) the use of fear-based appeals causes some people to control the transmitted fear through reactions like denial, apathy, and disengagement rather than engaging the issue and potential solutions/mitigations. Media tactics are no secret to the general public and the more extreme the methods employed, the more likely people are to question the possibility of manipulation and the integrity of the communicating organization (especially governmental authorities). Simply put, fear has the

power to shut people down rather than encourage agency. So, while a fear-based rhetoric may have the ability to capture people's attention in the short term, it also has the power to alienate and desensitize audiences because they are suspicious of the information being given to them. Common examples of desensitization, apathy, or general distrust because of media tactics were seen in public responses to Deepwater Horizon, Chernobyl, Baia Mare cyanide spill, Bhopal gas tragedy, and the Fukushima nuclear accident. Put simply, manipulation through media tactics does not work as an effective communicative strategy.

Fear-Based Rhetoric Reflects Dysfunction

Another pressing issue with fear-based rhetoric is that it is reflective of the overall dysfunction taking place at political levels and, therefore, tends to convey environmental illness rather than proactive treatments. This reality seems to only deepen as the extent of environmental crises exponentially grows. Speaking to this, in his seminal book, Normal Accidents, renowned sociologist Perrow (1984, 10) explains how "Time and time again warnings are ignored, unnecessary risks taken, sloppy work done, deception and downright lying practiced," which translates to how information around a disaster is presented for mass consumption. This is why there can never be one simplistic reason or entity to blame for why an event happens, how it worsens and spreads, and how it is managed through the interplay of experts, government entities, and the media. In short, fear-based rhetoric is being conveyed through thinly veiled chaos. Compounding the issue is that the scope, reach, and production of American media is not controlled directly by the government; subsequently, there is a wider pool of information available through various mediums, including sources with little to no expertise and private agendas. As a result, "The changed media landscape is seen as providing a fertile ground for skepticism and poses challenges for public risk communication" (Ihlen et al., 2021), especially when most people access news content through social media platforms.

Scientific Knowledge does not Equal Engagement and Agency

In addition to media dysfunction, another concern is the information-deficit model as a communication strategy whereby scientists falsely assume that there is a knowledge deficit that can be corrected through scientific facts. This model falsely assumes that scientific explanations surrounding climate change are enough to promote public awareness and enact change, whereas in reality "there are a number of interlinked sociological, psychological and political effects which disconnect people from acting on climate change" (Bushell et al., 2017). In essence, the problem is that scientific information can be so complex that audiences dismiss it because it is incomprehensible or they blindly accept it since it sounds intelligent. In either scenario, there is no authentic engagement nor agency.

Fear-based Rhetoric as an Echo Chamber

Another shortcoming of fear-based rhetoric is that it often operates within an echo chamber. In other words, people seek out and/or are provided with information tailored to match their preexisting beliefs. As a result, whether fear-based rhetoric proclaims the planet's destruction or insists that environmental crises are a farce, the disseminated information serves little function and promotes a negative mindset since people's preconceived notions are reinforced. The contemporary information environment is ubiquitous, so oftentimes people do not actively seek the news to stay informed because the news will find them (Strauß et al., 2021). Compounding the issue, a great deal of "news" consumption takes place via social media platforms where little to no regulation exists. Coupled with machine learning algorithms, the news is curated for individual users ensuring that they see information they already agree with; thus, the information individuals are exposed to is an echo chamber that solidifies their already preconceived beliefs. This becomes problematic in a globalized world where we are increasingly interconnected in a multitude of ways.

Why Engage with Environmental Concerns?

With all of these faulty issues in the current system, it begs the question: why engage in environmental concerns at all? A simple response is that current environmental risks are no longer limited to a particular country or region, but rather affect everyone. We truly are global citizens, for better or for worse. On this

issue, in his seminal book Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity, Ulrich Beck, the most cited social scientist in his lifetime, uses the pollution debate (1992, 26, 39) as an example of risks that are transboundary. In the three decades that have passed since the publication of his work, there has been an uptick in transboundary environmental problems as a result of modernization and technology. As Danisch (2010, 180) reiterates two decades later, people are now skeptical of science and technology because they create the very problems we face. In other words, industrialization and modernity have brought about climate change, but is more technology the solution? As invisible hazards become increasingly more visible and widespread, Beck encourages self-reflection at all levels and calls for "a cooperation across the trenches of disciplines, citizens' groups, factories, administration and politics" (1992, p. 29). This reflection is especially important in the contemporary global world since nature, human activity, and technology intersect and collude to cause disasters that have global consequences (Cutter, 2021). Put simply, we are all stakeholders in environmental concerns, so we should find mechanisms of being both informed and involved in a proactive manner that provides agency and affects positive change.

A commonly stated (though not medically accurate) understanding of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. In terms of environmental communication and action, as philosopher Bertrand Russell (2009) notes, "Neither a man nor a crowd nor a nation can be trusted to act humanely or to think sanely under the influence of a great fear." Perhaps, therefore, it is time that efforts to inform and motivate the public were based upon a philosophy of hope rather than fear, a philosophy that espouses action at the local level, a philosophy that educates through accountability, community, and agency rather than distant, terrifying threat. The principles and practices of ecological restoration offer just such an approach.

Defining Ecological Restoration

"Restoration is like adding a birthing room to a hospital that had only a trauma center."

~ Peter Berg

One beauty of the practice and literature of ecological restoration is its comprehensive nature. Some restorationists focus upon restoring degraded landscapes to their historical trajectory (how it might exist currently had humanity not tinkered with nature), while others are concerned primarily with the restoration of health and biodiversity to ecosystems with less concern over native versus exotic flora and fauna.

However, we would argue that despite differences in methodology and even core objectives, all restorationists share the goal of wanting to restore whole systems to a healthy state. Likewise, restoration work nearly always emphasizes community involvement, sustainability, environmental and cultural healing, history of place, and a multidisciplinary approach drawing upon the expertise of different fields. These aspects of restoration resonate with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, specifically goals 13: Climate Action, 14: Life Below Water, and 15: Life on Land. As a means for illustrating the diversity and depth of the field, we will briefly provide a few varying approaches to ecological restoration practices.

The Society of Ecological Restoration, formed in 1987, is the oldest and most established restoration organization of the fairly young field. They offer a traditional definition:

Ecological restoration is an intentional activity that initiates or accelerates the recovery of an ecosystem with respect to its health, integrity, and sustainability. Frequently, the ecosystem that requires restoration has been degraded, damaged, transformed or entirely destroyed as the direct or indirect result of human activities . . . Restoration attempts to return an ecosystem to its historic trajectory. (SER Science and Policy Working Group, 2004)

Based upon this definition, traditional restoration projects attempt to restore degraded ecosystems to a healthy state resembling what they might have looked like before European disturbance. Typical projects

include erosion control, removal of invasive species, reintroduction of native species, sequestration of toxins, daylighting streams (adjusting water ways to promote healthy vegetation and spawning areas), reforestation, and any type of intervention that will improve the system's ability to be self-sustaining and healthy for native species. Specific goals are established through heavy research on the historical conditions of an area including taxonomies of indigenous plant and animal life when available. Simply stated, the idea is to fix what humans have broken by making it as close to the "original" as possible.

Another restoration perspective places a greater emphasis upon the anthropological aspects inherent in restoration efforts. It questions: Who were the original inhabitants? How can their descendants be involved in restoration efforts? What effects will restoration efforts have on the local community? How can the local community be involved in the project? In addition, there is an emphasis on the importance of a continued, managerial relationship between humanity and the restored ecosystem. For example, Stewart Allison, noted ecologist and restorationist, writes in Ecological Restoration and Environmental Change how "[I]t is obvious that the entire program of ecological restoration is influenced by human choice from its very beginning. Humans decide what ecosystems to restore, what the end goal is, where the restoration will be located and the methods used to achieve restoration . . . it is difficult for me to imagine a restored ecosystem ever becoming free from active human management" (Allison, 2012, 6). For Allison, sustained human involvement is not only necessary but also desirable since many of the benefits of restoration efforts rest upon continued interactions between community and land. Similarly, restoration journalist Paddy Woodworth writes: "In a very real sense, every landscape in the era of anthropogenic climate change is a cultural one. The human footprint falls implacably today on every Arctic glacier and on each remote rainforest ecosystem, even though no actual human being may have ever set foot there" (Woodworth, 2013, 137). For restorationists working from this philosophical perspective, the human animal is a keystone species requiring consideration as well.

A third approach occupies a much wilder, almost lawless space in the field in its focus upon novel ecosystems (systems that comprise both native and exotic species), species substitution, assisted migration, and urban-based restoration. In essence, the idea is that while there is value in restoring "pristine" areas (such as Yosemite and Yellowstone), it is vital that projects also address the ecosystems in our own backyards and focus upon biodiversity and ecosystem health above all other concerns. Emma Marris, author of the groundbreaking book Rambunctious Garden, is one of the leading proponents for this branch of ecological restoration. She writes, "When conservationists focus on 'pristine wilderness' only, they give people the impression that that's all that nature is. And so urban, suburban, and rural citizens believe that there is no nature where they live; that it is far away and not their concern. They can lose the ability to have spiritual and aesthetic experiences in more humble natural settings" (Marris, 2011, 150). Instead, she advocates for a "global, half-wild rambunctious garden" with an emphasis on health, aesthetics, ability to thrive in light of climate change, and ecosystem services. For Marris, any and every space has the potential for restoration including apartment decks, toxic mine sites, and even gas station parking lots. As she writes, "Rewilding, assisted migration, and embracing some exotic species and novel ecosystems may seem like disparate strategies, but they are all at some level about making the most out of every scrap of land and water, no matter its condition" (Marris, 2011, 135). Perhaps it is an odd analogy, but when contemplating this approach, a pair of patchwork pants that create a functioning whole out of bits and pieces of scraps discarded from previous work comes to mind. The result is colorful, functional, and a far cry from traditional attire.

To truly define ecological restoration's varying methodologies and philosophies takes a book at the very least (see Paddy Woodworth's Our Once and Future Planet). However, it is clear that the scope of the field is broad and offers a space for many different philosophical and methodological approaches. Griffin-Padgett and Allison (2010), for example, argue how restorative rhetoric provides a mechanism to manage crisis situations by combining strategic communication with humanistic communication. Regardless of focus, all restoration projects strive for health and healing. As a result, the rhetoric surrounding ecological restoration mirrors the field: broad in scope and hopeful.

Restoration of Environmental Hope

"I like restoration; it's the only really proactive kind of thing we do. Everything else is an orderly retreat"

~ William K. Stevens

The most salient form of hope present in ecological restoration literature is, of course, the improvements to degraded landscapes. Unlike the typical imagery and rhetoric found in environmental texts—think Al Gore's images of polar caps melting and marooned bear cubs crying for their dead mother—ecological restoration begins with the degraded landscape and then details efforts toward improvement and a return to health. Though not all efforts are successful, the general attitude is one of optimistic intervention, and even failures have the byproduct of increased knowledge and understanding of an ecosystem. Paddy Woodworth discusses this concept in light of pioneer restoration projects, projects with no methodological precedent. He writes: "It is natural that there is as much to learn from its failures as from its achievements. Nor is it surprising that many of these failures derive precisely from its bold attempt to combine ecological, economic, and social goals" (Woodworth, 2013, 67). However, many restoration efforts are successful. In fact, despite the field's relatively low profile in the public consciousness, there are literally thousands of successful restoration projects taking place around the world. As a means of illustration, a few projects and the hopeful language embodied within the literature surrounding these efforts are detailed below.

Dan O'Brien, a cattle rancher in South Dakota, begins his narrative Buffalo for the Broken Heart at a point of despair, a common rhetorical move in restoration literature (a move that mirrors the practice). He writes, "The economy was racing along a rosy highway until, for no apparent reason, cattle prices suddenly stalled, then fell. Everyone who owned a cow hit the windshield of that speeding economy and the result was damage to the land, our dreams, and our self-esteem" (O'Brien, 2001, 5). Similarly, he outlines the history of the American Bison (what is commonly referred to as a "buffalo") and its near extinction in 1890 from mass slaughter. In essence, he is depressed with his ranch and the bloody history of the land. However, unlike the predecessor of his farm who drank himself nearly to death, O'Brien decides to become proactive in the health of his ranch through restoration efforts regardless of economic gain. He begins by soliciting the help of Ducks Unlimited (a conservation group for the protection of waterfowl) in efforts to plant native grasses and contour land to create natural pools for waterfowl. O' Brien explains, "My plan was to restore the valley to something resembling what might have been there when wild buffalo were there. At that time, I was not interested in profitability. I just wanted the land to be healthy and stable" (O'Brian, 2001, 74). The success of these efforts and a great deal of research on buffalo led to O'Brien's reintroduction of buffalo to the land.

The next rhetorical move in restoration literature is to introduce healing and growth. While O'Brien's initial herd is small and the learning curve steep, it doesn't take long to reaffirm the fact that buffalo are much more sustainable and environmentally healthy animals than cattle. He writes, "[F]rom the first I could see that they were perfectly suited for this country where insulation from winter winds and summer sun was vital. They were a product of this country, selected not by men to conform to human logic but by the elements of this land to meet pressures beyond our experience" (O'Brien, 2001, 77). Beyond the buffalo's superior ability to survive in both severe cold and hot conditions, he argues, it has the unique habit of rutting in the earth and then wandering great distances (not cattle behavior). This practice has the effect of churning soil, collecting seeds on the coats of the buffalo, and then spreading them in ecologically beneficial patterns. Furthermore, a buffalo does not require the litany of hormones and antibiotics typically given to cattle. As a result of these factors, he argues that the buffalo is better for the environment and human consumption. Towards the end of the story, O'Brien has the epiphany that "Only buffalo have the power to massage this land back to health" (2001, 166). It is important to note as well that he is no martyr; in the long run, not only does his buffalo farming restore the land to a state of health, it also makes him a great deal of money—both elements of hope.

Shifting gears, William K. Stevens' Miracle under the Oaks: The Revival of Nature in America offers a great example of a slightly more traditional restoration project steeped in environmental healing and hope. Beginning with the grass roots of the project in the late 1970s, Stevens chronicles the efforts of Steve Packard—a man who was to become a rogue hero in restoration circles—to restore areas of severely degraded prairie land and savannas in the Chicago region. In the beginning of the story Stevens (1995, 19)

introduces the reader to the degraded state in which Steve Packard originally found his restoration site, Vestal Grove:

Packard found the site strewn with mattresses, car seats, and milk crates that teenagers used as seats for outdoor parties. Bottle and cans were everywhere. Kentucky Fried Chicken take-out cartons, plastic buckets, and an automobile muffler decorated the ground. More serious from an ecological point of view, the site was choked by twenty-foot-high thickets of European buckthorn, an invader from abroad whose dense growth obliterated the original grasses and flowers, destroying not only the savanna ecosystem but also any possibility of knowing what it had been like.

In the tradition of restoration literature, Stevens paints a vivid image of degradation so that readers will have a point of comparison for the restoration that is to unfold throughout the story. Not only is this a logical beginning for the account of a restoration project, but it is also a strategic rhetorical move as western culture identifies strongly with the "before and after" trope, a trope which hinges upon the reader's desire for transformation.

Packard, we learn, found himself with an "empty hole" in his life until he stumbled upon ecological restoration (Stevens, 1995, 47). Not trained in the sciences, his initial foray into becoming what people would later classify as a "first-rate amateur ecologist" was to spend hours wandering the Chicago area identifying wildflowers. Soon he was involved with various environmental groups (including the Sierra Club), and spent a large amount of time reading about historical prairie conditions and seeking out what remained of the prairies in the Chicago area. Though most of what he found was severely degraded, he did stumble upon small patches that hinted at the potential of the place. Stevens writes: "[A] realization was growing: Here, right under people's noses in the Forest Preserve prairie remnants, was a small world that deserved saving, and maybe he could help do it" (Stevens, 1995, 50). Following this exciting discovery, Packard commits entirely to the cause and the North Branch Prairie Project is born.

The remainder of the story is oddly gripping considering that a great deal of the subject matter has to do with the specifics of plant life, coping with invasive species, utilizing indigenous burning practices, and the politics involved in restoring public lands. However, much more than the personal growth of Packard and his band of restorationists, the reader is drawn into the transformation of the prairies and savannas. We become intimately acquainted with the land from the tops of old Oak trees to the composition of the soil. In this sense, the land becomes the primary character, the protagonist whom we very much want to see succeed. We suffer through the years of poor growth, and we rejoice when indigenous plants finally begin to thrive and prodigal animal species return to make Vestal Grove and surrounding areas their home again. Packard illustrates the emotional investment and hope embedded within his group's efforts when he writes, "A restorationist, like a parent, needs to protect an unsteady being from certain great insults to its health or existence. Similar to good parenting or coaching or teaching, the goal of restoration is to help some life go forward on its own—and in the process become more truly itself" (Stevens, 1995, 290). A vision of landscapes recovering and becoming actualized is the antithesis of most modern environmental rhetoric, a rhetoric that begins with images of the historical pristine and then offers images of current decay, despair, and degradation.

In the last chapter of the book "Vestal Grove: Present and Future," Stevens (1995, 301) leaves the reader with a utopian vision of the now restored site:

Somme Prairie Grove, resplendent in bronze and gold against a deep green backdrop of oaks, in in full reproductive flush. A sea of Indian grass and big bluestem, more than six feet tall with seed heads rapidly ripening, shimmers in the rays of a fading sun. The delicate heads tickle the face. There are more of them than ever—millions of seeds with which to enlarge the steadily expanding reach of restored ecosystems in metropolitan Chicago. Crowds of bright yellow sawtooth sunflowers, chest-high, punctuate the grassland of the open savanna.

In the end, the reader is given a sense of accomplishment and optimism—if Chicago's polluted landscapes can be transformed into places of incredible beauty and health, then perhaps restoration is possible anywhere.

Restoration of Cultural Hope

"The land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics. That land yields a cultural harvest is a fact long known, but latterly often forgotten."

~Alodo Leopold

An inspiring aspect of ecological restoration is that its reach extends beyond the healing of environmental degradation; it also has the potential to unite people and restore community health. As William Jordan, an influential member of the restoration community argues, "The success of restoration hinges on the extent to which it engages communities, becoming interwoven into local cultures as forms of performance and ritual" (as cited in Richardson & MacDonald, 2013, 320). A common goal of restoration literature, therefore, is to convey the cultural and community healing present in restoration projects. Broadly speaking, storytelling has the capacity to both educate and advocate, which in turn alters people's behavior, creates cultural shifts, and encourages policy change (Van De Carr, 2013). Rotmann (2017) uses 'Shape Energy,' the EU platform, as a driving example of how storytelling can bridge the divide between stakeholders and energy experts from more than 20 different nations. A perfect illustration of this goal can be found in Freeman House's Totem Salmon: Life Lessons from Another Species. This particular restoration project took place throughout the 1980s in Northern California's Humboldt area and was designed to help protect endangered Salmon communities in the Mattole watershed area. The Mattole watershed area is one of the last remaining refuges for a variety of unique strains of salmon since the fish's existence had become increasingly threatened by the construction of roads, houses, and logging sites, all of which led to erosion. Erosion, in turn, caused large quantities of sediment to filter into the river and destroy riparian (stream-side) vegetation and the salmon's mating areas. At the time the restoration efforts began, several hundred distinct strains of salmon had already gone extinct and the salmon egg fertilization success rate of 50% typical in healthy waters was reduced to 8% in Mattole watershed. In contemplating the choices made by humanity that led to this destruction, House (1999, 49) follows the pattern of ecological restoration literature by setting up his story with accounts of degradation: "[E]ven as we humans have exhausted our sources of sustenance, we have convinced ourselves that there is no other way to act. We have engaged in a process of purposeful and systematic forgetting; we have lost previous models of a more elegantly balanced life among humans, and we have convinced each other that it is fruitlessly utopian to imagine any other way of life." However, unlike the two previous examples, which focused primarily upon environmental degradation, House's gaze is on the serious nature of modern cultural degradation and the need for a return to cultural health.

To illustrate, Freeman House gives the reader historical background on the relationship between indigenous communities of the Mattole watershed and the salmon that sustained their existence. Unlike most modern perspectives, these indigenous peoples saw salmon as a gift from the creator that "gives itself, alive and generous" (House, 1999, 10). Their lives were so intertwined with the salmon that they developed complex rituals designed to protect the fish populations and to share the bounty with other tribes. In many ways, the intertribal peace sustained for many generations hinged upon the symbiotic relationship between humans and salmon. He writes, "Humans lived on the northwest coasts of North America for thousands of years in a state of lavish natural provision inseparable from any concept of individual or community life and survival. Human consciousness organized the collective experience as an unbroken field of being: there is no separation between people and the multitudinous expression of place manifested as food" (House, 1999, 12). House offers the reader this ecologically utopian information not as a depressing backdrop against which we judge current practices, but rather as a model for restoration and the type of cultural and spiritual connection needed to maintain a healthy relationship with salmon.

In many ways, Totem Salmon is as much about the community connections and concerns surrounding the restoration project as it is about the project itself. Like the vision House paints of the interconnectedness

between human and salmon in historical times, the restoration of the salmon's habitat and numbers in House's narrative also required a strong community engagement. As the author notes, "The effort had to grow beyond population enhancement to engagement with the healing process of the watershed so that this place could once again become a habitat that supported the needs of all its species, including humans" (House, 1999, 153). House's restorationist group, the Mattole Restoration Committee (MRC), initially encountered a great deal of resistance from community members. Conflict between descendants of the original European settlers and the wave of "new settlers" (more recent, politically liberal arrivals looking to begin a new homesteading way of life) led to a great deal of disagreement about the best ways to approach restoration and their willingness to become involved, period. However, the restorationists mitigated much of the conflict and united the disparate groups together through the use of several approaches.

To begin, they created and mailed out the MRC poster, a poster that "pointed to the long-term economic consequences of short-term exploitation of forest resources in terms of the ability of resident landowners to support themselves in the future" (House, 1999, 168). This piece of visual rhetoric had an "electrifying impact" and helped to garner support for community meetings. In addition, the MRC created a map situating individual properties in relationship to local forests and waters as opposed to the arbitrarily imposed boundaries of official maps. This, too, had a galvanizing effect: "For the first time, all the inhabitants of the watershed had a common reference point from which to consider their undeniably related futures" (House, 1999, 169). In community meetings when conflicts began to get out of hand, the MRC would point out that if the locals couldn't work together, then the government would come in and take control of the project. Though this was a manipulative strategy, it was grounded in truth and worked wonders in uniting people of vastly different socio-economic and political persuasions—"my enemy's enemy is my friend" ideology. The MRC also waded through miles of bureaucratic red tape to get approval for local community-governance and maintenance of the restoration effort. This meant that locals were trained to run equipment and manage the restoration of riverbanks and spawning habitats. All these efforts worked as a unifying force fostering a perspective of community responsibility, agency, and identity.

In the end, the restoration effort resulted in an egg-to-fry survival rate of over 87%, "an eightfold increase over what could be expected in a river system so severely degraded" (House, 1999, 207). Furthermore, Freeman House's text leaves the reader with a sense of cultural renewal and hope: "As we awaken from the dream of total dominion, we find ourselves as individuals struggling to understand the world as it is. Adapting to that world requires that we understand ourselves as individuals, as groups, and as one species among others—that we learn to live our collective and individual lives on the Earth's own terms" (House, 1999, 198). Even had the effort to repair the salmon's habitat failed, the bonds formed by the community were already formed through their mutual effort.

Another interesting, albeit unusual, example of cultural restoration can be found in Novella Carpenter's memoir Farm City. Though not marketed as an ecological restoration text, the memoir's journey through an urban farmer's struggles in downtown Oakland illuminates many core tenants of restoration ecology. Perhaps the most noticeable of these tenants is the cultural restoration generated by the presence of her farm. When Novella and her boyfriend Bill first move into GhostTown (a local name for their degraded neighborhood), they are excited and intimidated. The excitement stems from a vacant lot behind their apartment that they plan to garden. The intimidation is a result of the rundown and dangerous appearance of the block. As Novella explains, "The place was a postcard of urban decay . . . Cheetos bags somersaulted across the road. An eight-story brick building on the corner was entirely abandoned and tattooed with graffiti. Living here would definitely mean getting out of my comfort zone" (Carpenter, 2009, 10). In the tradition of restoration principles and practices, she begins with a degraded landscape, faulty system, and anxiety regarding her own agency but then moves forward from there.

Unlike more traditional restoration texts, however, the progress forward is less about improvements to the land than about the unification of the community through her animals and garden. Though Novella certainly improves the ecological quality of the vacant lot to create a highly functional garden and an aesthetically pleasing space, it is in the sharing of her produce, meat, and knowledge that we begin to see a picture of community bonding. In one scene a run-down man wanders into her garden to pick some carrots and just as Novella is about to tell him to return when they are bigger, he starts to cry. "This place reminds

me of my grandma," he tells her. "Everything's so growing" (Carpenter, 2009. 23). Likewise, the block's homeless man, Bobby, does odd jobs for Novella and Bill and by the end of the memoir he seems more like a family member when he joyfully tells them: "I love you guys!" (Carpenter, 2009, 180). Examples of community connections abound. The local Yemini shopkeeper dotes on Novella's honey and shares beekeeping stories from his home country. Lana, the eccentric vegetarian neighbor, brings her daughter over often to play with the rabbits and pass time with Novella. Neighborhood kids group around the urban farm and enjoy homemade pizza, petting the animals, and playing in the garden. One youngster even gets permission from his mother to keep a rabbit and begins an unlikely journey for an inner-city child. Novella provides vegetables for the Black Panthers, her "hillbilly" neighbors, and a kind Vietnamese couple. She trades greens for fresh caught fish from an elderly African American woman running an illegal café. She forms a friendship with Chris, a local restaurant owner, who ends up teaching her his secrets for making pork products and helping her with her pigs. Likewise, Novella meets Willow, another urban farmer, and forms an ally in her farming and outreach efforts. The relationships built around her odd little farm form a cohesive community, demonstrating the transboundary nature of environmental collaboration even at the local level.

While her gardening and farming project may not seem like ecological restoration at first appearance, the fact that Novella feeds her animals through dumpster diving, cultivates a degraded piece of land and transforms it into a community garden, learns animal husbandry skills lost to city dwellers, and, most importantly, creates a space of community fellowship and sharing is most certainly restoration at its best. Near the end of her story, she writes, "These past few years had been strange ones, perhaps, for a place known as GhostTown. All of us—the Vietnamese families, the African American teenagers, the Yemeni storekeepers, the Latino soccer players, and, yes, the urban farmers—had somehow found a way to live together. To share and discover our heritage with one another" (Carpenter, 2009, 266). Novella's efforts show the reader that it does not take money or access to acres of land to plant the seed of hope and restore a place to health.

Conclusion

"If enough of us lean together in the right direction, our trajectory can change; we do have the ability to alter the course of events. We have to make this effort—because the alternative is unthinkable."

~Martin Keogh

The public is continuously bombarded by environmental messages of doom, destruction, and degradation. As Woodworth writes, "The environmental movement has generally tended to focus on catastrophic scenarios, on narratives of loss and desolation. The impact of these narratives is often more numbing than energizing" (2013, 435), as demonstrated through the communicative practices of environmental risk, disaster, and fear. Saab (2023) highlights how climate change discourse focuses so much on fear that it can lead to 'climate change fatigue' and disengagement. Similarly, Chaturvedi and Doyle (2015) use the phrase 'catastrophe fatigue' in relation to climate change, which they argue has now joined the ranks of 'nuclear' and 'biosecurity' as alarmist categories. As a result, current environmental rhetoric leaves very little room for hope or agency. Timothy Morton, in his text Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World, posits that our current environmental problems are often portrayed at such massive, decontextualized scales that they render "both denialism and apocalyptic environmentalism obsolete" (Morton, 2013, 2). The practice and language of ecological restoration, on the other hand, emphasizes tangible problems and the healing of them as opposed to despair. It takes degradation and, through community effort, actively works to repair the damage we have done. It is local. It is tangible. It rejects the notion of unmitigated disaster and deals in solutions as opposed to problems. William K. Stevens puts it well when he writes, "No longer content to try to hold the line in an often losing attempt to protect nature, conservationists are at last moving from the defensive to the offensive. They are striking back, and restoration is their tool" (Stevens, 1995, 145). Fortunately, involvement with restoration work is not limited to the hands of ecologists. There is a part to be played by everyone, including those of us in the humanities. While no one is arguing that ecological restoration has all the answers to the crises facing our planet, it is a

step in the right direction both in terms of the projects underway and the rhetoric of hope these projects generate.

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