

Restoration and Novel Ecosystems: Priority or Paradox?



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The practice of ecological restoration is challenged by the advent of novelty (as a concept and in reality) in ecosystems. Over the last decade this has become the focal point of continuing intramural debate, leading restoration practitioners and researchers to reject, defend, revise, and reframe premises and goals. In a world of accelerating environmental change, restoration can be seen—depending on one’s perspective—as more necessary than ever, or as essentially futile. Can we reconcile these views? Can we adapt restoration’s narrative to fit these changing circumstances? Should we? How? By revisiting restoration’s history and defining a more nuanced approach to ecosystem novelty, we may be able to find space for, if not reconciliation, at least accommodation. Aldo Leopold, one of restoration’s pioneer thinkers and practitioners, recognized as early as the 1930s that the human impact on the “biotic community” was pervasive; that “wilderness is a relative condition”; that conservationists had to recognize “the dynamics of [the land’s] past history and probable future.” At the same time, he pursued restoration as a necessary new aspect of conservation practice, “a positive exercise of skill and insight, not merely a negative exercise of abstinence or caution.” He framed his land ethic as “a mode of guidance for meeting ecological situations so new or intricate” [emphasis added] that society had not yet evolved an effective ethical response. Since Leopold’s generation, the “great acceleration” in global environmental change has altered the context in which we assess the promise and potential of restoration. It has only deepened, however, the need for conservation science, policy, ethics, and practice to pull together in engendering resilient landscapes. Ecological restoration remains an essential means of doing so, albeit with redefined aims and methods.