Recreating the Creation

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I
n 1999, Connie Barlow, an advocate for environmental causes, declared that the “rewilding [of nature] must be undertaken because, next to outright species extinctions, the most abhorrent outcome—the greatest crime against creation—humankind might effect would be for surviving lineages [of plant and animal species] to skew their future evolution substantially in response to us.” She acknowledged that the human species in this case would not be acting according to Darwin’s model of competitive struggle. Rather, it was based on a “strong ethical, even religious appeal.” Like many secular environmentalists, she was notably vague about the basis for her strong religious convictions. Perhaps the theological sources did not need to be spelled out formally—a view consistent with pietistic and some other branches of Protestantism that historically have been skeptical of any “scholastic” tendencies toward an overly intellectual statement of their beliefs. In essence, for her it was self-evident that “we shudder because we know in our souls that this behavior [of human hegemony over nature] is not right. This is not the way to be human. This is not our ideal for participation in the Earth Community.” Indeed, it was a simple truth too obvious to require elaborate justification: Human beings must not play God with the world.

The idea of “rewilding” large parts of the North American landscape was the most radical form of what in fact had become a general theme of mainstream American environmentalism—the urgent necessity of “restoring” significant parts of the natural world. This was not meant to be merely a general statement of philosophical principles but to offer a specific guide for government policy and management. Restoration of ecological systems, environmentalists increasingly declared, should be the operational goal of the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the many other government agencies whose activities had in the past and could in the future still significantly affect the natural world.

But “restoration” to what natural order? The answer of a literalist Christian conservative might be to restore nature to the condition of the world as found at the beginning—some 6,000 years ago. But even such a Christian would have to admit that it would be difficult to know now what this original state of nature might have been, either in a general way for the earth or for any given landscape. The answer would have seemed much clearer until the nineteenth century because the world then was seen in static terms, and the restoration of “the creation” could be interpreted as simply reversing any recent modifications (the only ones likely to be known) of nature that had resulted from human actions. Since the nineteenth century, however, there has been a much greater awareness of the very long history of the earth as well as of the continuing dynamic and evolutionary character of the natural world, operating in some cases to transform natural conditions significantly even within a time frame of 6,000 years or less (sometimes through rapid climatic shifts, for example). Much of the current area of the Sahara desert, for example, received much more rainfall until around 3,500 B.C.

As Barlow suggested, one solution to this problem would be to restore nature to the condition that existed at the specific point in the past where human actions began to alter the character of evolution. Even if this did not result in the restoration of the one “creation state” (an impossibility in any case), it would mean that the outcome of evolution might itself be described as “natural.” Many environmentalists, moreover, have assumed that North and South America were largely unaltered by human actions until the arrival of Europeans. For them, restoring a
natural evolutionary order has meant a return to the biological world of the Americas as it existed before European settlement.

Barlow saw the Euro-centric fallacy of this thinking, however. As she had to acknowledge, there is “strong scientific evidence that we humans are centrally implicated” in the large-scale loss of mammoths, mastodons, sabertooth cats, American lions, and many other mega-fauna that lived in North America and South America at that time. The arrival of modern humans from Asia had seemingly led to the extinction of many species. Barlow considers that it will also therefore be necessary to redress this earlier “crime against creation” in the Americas even well prior to European settlement. It is difficult to see how this could be accomplished, however, given the absence of any surviving mega-fauna. As a substitute, Barlow proposes the restoration of African elephants in North America today as wild animals.

Although hardly a perfect solution, and certainly a politically unlikely prospect, it would be in concept—along with introducing wild lions, tigers, and other appropriate large species now found only in Africa and Asia—the closest approximation possible to the goal of restoring some of the great American mega-fauna of the past. If we do not “bring elephants back and offer them a chance for an evolving, deepening citizenship” in the current natural world, she says, “then Order Proboscidea will never again produce American endemics; the evolution of Order Proboscidea in the New World will be over.” For Barlow, that would be unconscionable and unimaginable—a terrible evil. Instead, elephants should be brought back and allowed to evolve in whatever directions nature might take them, perhaps eventually resulting in new species of “wild” American elephants altogether.

Barlow has of course ended up in a tangle of contradictions. She wants natural evolution to occur without human impact and control and then goes ahead to propose that current human actions should set the stage for future evolution in the Americas. She sees a natural evolution as the highest policy goal and yet is asking human beings to behave in the most unnatural of ways by the standards of any other plant and animal species. She does not speak directly of human acts of “playing God” with the earth but would no doubt disavow any such objective. Yet the idea of “restoring the Creation” is about as God-like an action as can be imagined, tantamount to “recreating the Creation.” It

presumes that human beings not only should replicate the plan for the world that God had at the beginning but also that human beings have the same capacity as God to take a divine design and transform it into a physical reality in the world. In other words, human beings would virtually have to be God, the very antithesis of the goal supposedly being sought by Barlow and others with similar views.

Barlow is not alone in her confusions. Leaving aside any talk of God and the creation, the goal of restoring nature is widely advocated among environmentalists, even as they also advocate less human “manipulation” of the natural world. But it cannot be both ways. The technical and engineering skills that would have to be applied to restore past natural conditions would be substantial. Large financial and other resources would have to be committed to scientific study of the workings of ecological systems. Large numbers of ecological “engineers” would have to be put in the field. It would be a new comprehensive “scientific management” of nature—achieving what might be called a new form of “environmental progress.” Yet a main theme of contemporary environmentalism is the past failures of scientific management of nature, its frequent infeasibility, and its inappropriateness for the future. Environmentalism routinely criticizes the past misguided worship of a false god of scientific and economic “progress.”

Some environmentalists are aware of these tensions in thinking about restoration and have sought to address them. Probably the majority of environmentalists have not thought the matter through in any careful way. American environmentalism has had the character of a moral crusade. Like Barlow above, it is enough to feel and assert powerful new (or old) religious convictions in the treatment of the natural environment. There has been little urgency given to developing a well-crafted and carefully reasoned body of environmental theology that would reconcile messages that might otherwise seem to be contradictory. This anti-intellectual strategy has thus far been workable at the level of enunciating broad environmental values and declaring their central ethical importance for the future protection of the earth. But more careful analysis and thought will eventually be necessary in making specific policy recommendations to government agencies that will then be responsible for the regulation and management of American lands and other parts of the natural world in the future.

**Spotted Owls and Barred Owls**

There is no more visible project for ecological restoration on the public lands than the federal effort to protect and revive populations of the northern spotted owl—and the “old growth” (or “ancient”) in environ-
mental writings) forests in which spotted owls live. Indeed, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the political and legal struggle over the fate of the spotted owl set the stage for the emergence of ecosystem management as the guiding philosophy of public land management. Partly based on court interpretations of the federal Endangered Species Act, timber harvesting was drastically reduced on public lands in Oregon, Washington, and northern California in order to set aside large areas for spotted owl habitat. Biodiversity objectives of species preservation for the first time had trumped a high value economic use of the public lands over an entire region of the United States.

It is thus ironic that the spotted owl has now become a prominent symbol of the tensions, confusions, and even contradictions rife to environmental religion. Despite all the heroic federal and other government efforts of the past 20 years, as reported in 2008 in the High Country News (the unofficial environmental journal for the mountain West), the spotted owl “is now in a steep, unanticipated tailspin.” There was no sure scientific consensus, but “one of the most likely contributors to the bird’s decline is a newcomer to the Pacific Northwest. The barred owl, which has been moving in from the East, is bigger than the spotted owl and more aggressive. And it has been thriving as the spotted owl falters.” In terms of a Darwinian struggle, although similar in many respects, the barred owl had significant advantages. “Compared to spotted owls, barred owls … are as much as 15 percent bigger. Their young emerge earlier, and there are more of them”—broods that averaged three barred-owl young, versus one or two for spotted owls. Also, “barred owls are not picky about what they eat, picking up insects, frogs, shrews, and moles,” while “the spotted owl is much more dependent on rodents” alone.

Historically common in the East, until 75 years ago there were no reports of barred owls in the Pacific Northwest. Then, “in British Columbia, signs [of barred owls] had appeared in the 1940s” and in the 1970s in Oregon and Washington. Even as the protections for the spotted owl were being set in place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were emerging reports of “giant, ghostly owls [that] . . . had yellow-green beaks like spotted owls and tails like barred owls.” They were in fact “hybrids,” usually the product of a male spotted owl mating with a female barred owl (even though separate species, they are capable of jointly producing—sterile—offspring). In one Oregon forest, even though barred owls were seldom seen as recently as ten years ago, in 2008 they outnumbered spotted owls by three to two. Despite the absence of definitive scientific proof, as one northern California biologist states, “biologists in the field know without a doubt that the barred owls are having an effect on spotted owls.” Indeed, he knew of no cases in which “a spotted owl has managed to retain its territory when a barred owl shows up.”

Given the emblematic status of the spotted owl as the poster child of the Endangered Species Act, all this was disconcerting if not embarrassing for the Act’s defenders. A bitter political war had raged for years across the Pacific Northwest, and many small rural economies had been thrown into turmoil under the auspices of the Endangered Species Act, perhaps now all to no avail. Darwinian laws were more powerful than human hopes and expectations. The protections of the Endangered Species Act in their own way were another attempt by human beings to play God. But the God in heaven (or “nature”) was not cooperating. Perhaps again He had not been pleased, despite the novel form of this particular challenge to his authority, which now claimed to scientifically “restore” rather than “use” God’s own creation.

Perhaps because of the emblematic importance of the spotted owl crusade, the owl’s advocates, however, were not prepared to give up. They suggested that perhaps the barred owl was really a non-native or exotic species to the Pacific Northwest. The barred owl had in fact probably moved from its historic habitats in the East by traveling through forests that had been significantly altered by past human actions—“perhaps making their way through forests that grew as humans suppressed fire, perhaps taking advantage of higher summer temperatures in altered habitat, perhaps using trees along [humanly altered] creeks and rivers as pathways across the Plains.” But it was impossible to really say with scientific certainty whether the arrival of the barred owl in the Pacific Northwest was “natural” or “unnatural” (or even precisely what this distinction might mean). Perhaps the new competitive success of the barred owl was just another evolutionary episode following after many millions of other such Darwinian events over a billion years of natural evolution of the earth’s plant and animal species.

In any case, the possibility of the wide killing of barred owls in order to save the spotted owl is now...
being actively considered. In 2007 a new federal draft recovery plan for the spotted owl included an appendix on a “Barred Owl Removal Strategy.” According to another proposal, “one person, well-versed in barred owl strategies, could shoot two to four pair a night. . . . Getting adults in the spring before they breed would keep populations low enough to give the spotted owl a chance.” The government is already moving to keep barred owls from moving further south in national forests of California, part of an Endangered Species Act strategy to protect the genetically different Mexican spotted owl. If any barred owls show up in these more southerly national forests, the policy now is that they should all be killed as soon as possible. Further north in Oregon and Washington, however, the goal might be to manage them to sustain surviving populations of both northern spotted owls and barred owls. A complicating factor here is that this would probably induce new evolutionary changes in spotted owls—“the resulting bird would probably be smaller, to exploit niches unavailable to the larger barred owl. In south-central Mexico, the diminutive Mexican spotted owl coexists with a subspecies of barred owl that is larger than those moving in to the north.”

As discussed above, the basic objectives of ecosystem management and restoration for the public lands are that wild nature should be kept “untouched by human hand” to the maximum extent possible and, when nature has already been altered by human influences, it should be restored to an unaltered condition to the extent that this is practically feasible. As is now being contemplated, however, the Darwinian workings of recent possibly “natural” forces might actually result in the extinction of the northern spotted owl. If that threat exists, it is also being suggested that perhaps human beings must now actively manage the forests to protect the original (or at least pre-European) status of “the Creation”—a natural condition which included large numbers of spotted owls and no barred owls in the Pacific Northwest. As the conservation director for the Audubon Society of Portland states, and however uncomfortable the choice, it may be necessary to kill barred owls because, if they are not removed, “you may be making a decision to allow another species to go extinct”—for him an even more morally offensive outcome.

If the choice is between protecting the original creation (however this is understood) and allowing new evolutionary forces to do their thing, the former objective seemingly must prevail. Once again, secular environmental creationism implicitly comes close to its Christian fundamentalist cousin. If the goal is to protect “the Creation,” and the Creation has not been altered from the original six days in Genesis, then Darwin be damned. And it is not only the northern and the Mexican spotted owls. “Natural” sea lions and Caspian terns have been removed from the mouth of the Columbia River in order to protect endangered salmon runs. In the Channel Islands off California, growing numbers of federally protected golden eagles threatened the survival of an endangered subspecies of the gray fox. In response, a 2003 article in *Science* proposed “lethal removal” as a means of “removing protected populations [of eagles] to save [other] endangered species.” The National Park Service backed off from directly killing the golden eagles but did succeed (with the use of helicopters) in capturing and removing them (at very high public expense). As Kim Todd reports, “it’s only recently that agencies have begun trying to control one animal for the sake of another that is more endangered. But it’s happening now with increasing frequency.”

The result is a contradiction of the goal to maintain a true “natural” condition. Nature is being actively man-
The present debate raging over global warming exemplifies the clash between two competing public theologies. On one side, environmentalists warn of certain catastrophe if we do not take steps now to reduce the release of greenhouse gases; on the other side, economists are concerned with whether the benefits of actions to prevent higher temperatures will be worth the high costs. Questions of the true and proper relationship of human beings and nature are as old as religion. Today, environmentalists regard human actions to warm the climate as an immoral challenge to the natural order, while economists seek to put all of nature to maximum use for economic growth and other human benefits.

Robert Nelson interprets such contemporary struggles as battles between the competing secularized religions of economics and environmentalism. The outcome will have momentous consequences for us all. This deep book probes beneath the surface of the two movements’ rhetoric to uncover their fundamental theological commitments and visions.

“Nelson makes an overwhelmingly persuasive case that in our times the leading secular religion was once economics and is now environmentalism. . . . Out of that utterly original idea for scholarly crossovers—good Lord, an economist reading environmentalism and even economics itself as theology!—come scores of true and striking conclusions. . . . It’s a brilliant book, which anyone who cares about the economy or the environment or religion needs to read. That’s most of us.”
—Deirdre McCloskey, University of Illinois at Chicago

“Nelson compellingly argues that religion is a powerful force in economic and social life. . . . even if that fact is seldom recognized by most academics and policy makers. The dominant religious influences are secularized versions of Catholicism and Protestantism, not because the leading scholars are piously trying to advance their faith by other means, but because their intellectual horizons have been shaped by worldviews that have framed their consciousness. He convinces me that unless these presuppositions are acknowledged, examined, broadened, and revised, the economic and ecological crises that the world now faces will not be understood or met at their deeper levels.”
—Max L. Stackhouse, Princeton Theological Seminary

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ucts of modern geological and biological investigations. Secular environmental creationists experience virtually the same sense of religious awe and inspiration in the presence of nature—“the creation”—as their Christian counterparts. Yet they also profess to accept Darwin and other modern science. The result, however, would seem to be a large confusion in their thinking about the natural world. They experience it religiously, on the one hand, as “the creation,” and yet also write as professional experts and speak about it in biological terms as the product of hundreds of millions of years of random mutation and other Darwinist evolutionary workings. The ecological economist Herman Daly characterizes this as the “lurking inconsistency” in the thinking of the contemporary environmental movement.

These tensions within secular environmental creationism come to the fore when it is necessary to consider the meaning of ecosystem management and its central goal of environmental restoration. What is it that is being restored? In practice, it cannot be “the creation.” It is not necessary, moreover, to restore a process of Darwinian evolution because the workings of evolution never stopped—nor in principle could evolution ever be halted by human action. The goal might be to reset the evolutionary clock to a time frame preceding human impacts on the evolutionary result, but it now appears that this would be many tens of thousands or perhaps even a few hundred thousand or more years ago. Given the theological tenets of environmental creationism, in short, the goal of restoring the natural world would seem to be incoherent.

Nevertheless, heroic human activities are taking place with a justification of “restoring” nature. If the results are likely to be problematic, it will be due to intellectual—really theological—confusion as much as any technical difficulties in reengineering past natural systems. Theology is not just a matter of living a private moral life, or finding the personal path to a salvation in the hereafter. Religion, contrary to a widespread current impression, is not limited to matters of faith and emotion. A theology can be grounded in well-established facts and otherwise well constructed or it can exhibit an irrational logic and otherwise be intellectually deficient. A confused environmental theology is then likely to also produce wide policy and management confusions among the many government agencies that today must attempt to work out issues of the true and proper relationship of human beings and nature.

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