

LIMITS TO MANAGEMENT: A PHILOSOPHY FOR MANAGING LAND

By
Gregg Elliott

Written in 1996, as Projects Manager of the Center for Natural Lands Management, California, US. Sherry Teresa, Executive Director, (cnlmpres@aol.com) has granted her permission to reprint this piece.

Nature is ephemeral, enduring, everchanging, evolutionarily capricious, delicately balanced, tenaciously persistent, humorously outlandish, complex, interwoven, lavish and harsh. Any attempt to prescribe a management regime for such an entity is immediately suspect for its hubris -- the idea that we might be able to control, fine tune or "fix" it, much less understand it.

Having said this, I recognize and strongly advocate the need for stewardship of our natural areas -- stewardship in the noblest sense of the word. In this respect, stewardship means attending to the complexity and needs of ecosystems and their components with a humility that recognizes how much we still do not know or understand. Stewardship also means taking responsibility as a species for how our actions have and will continue to affect the planet -- most importantly our own backyards.

Although the ideal of wilderness, pristine and untouched by humans without need of our minor interference in its workings still provides a vision of life on earth that is, to many, comforting and inspiring, the reality is that in many places we no longer have the luxury of this vision. Stewardship involves primarily the mimicking of natural processes we have stymied and the control of our own behavior in an effort to prevent near-total obliteration of natural systems. Prescribed burns are to replace the wildfires we can no longer afford and now suppress. Grazing replaces the native herbivores that in many cases are no longer present. Exotics removal is an attempt to undo damage by organisms that we introduced. Restoration brings back badly needed habitat with the aspiration of preventing further losses to already beleaguered ecosystems. Fences keep out off-road vehicles or dogs or cattle, signs inform hunters and hikers, and education -- hopefully -- teaches our youth what it means to be a steward.

In this spirit of humility, recognizing that we do not always know what is best for any system, I believe we can, however, state with certainty that management of conservation and restoration areas will be best when provided in a context of landscapes with interrelated habitats large enough to encompass and still allow a semblance of natural processes: predator-prey relationships, natural disturbances like fire and floods, vegetation and associated wildlife changes as communities progress through various successional stages and begin the cycle again.

Natural systems that are self-sustaining will always contain wisdom far beyond that of a single primate species to foster their own continued health and survival. What I would argue against is the current trend, particularly evident in regulatory circles where restoration projects are mandated for the purpose of mitigating negative impacts such as development. This trend seems to be in the direction of requiring land managers to become "farmers of habitat," striving to maintain static conditions at a site as it appears

through one particular window in time. This focus on site-specific preservation of habitats or species demands an unrealistic level of control over natural systems, which ultimately proves self-defeating as surrounding land use, natural and man-made disturbance, and climate change make successional habitat changes not only unavoidable, but desirable.

The tricky, interesting, and profoundly significant part of stewardship is making the judgments that seek to foster an ecosystem's health in the absence of complete knowledge and understanding--and treading lightly enough to enable ourselves to change course when we recognize a mistake.

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Author details:

Gregg Elliott is one of the principal authors of the ***Riparian Bird Conservation Plan*** (located at www.prbo.org), prepared for the California Riparian Habitat Joint Venture, and she recently rejoined the staff of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory after an 8-month sabbatical. As manager for The Nature Conservancy (TNC) at the Cosumnes River Preserve from 1991 to 1995, she negotiated and guided implementation of a Cooperative Management Agreement among TNC, the California Dept. of Fish and Game, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Sacramento County Parks, and Ducks Unlimited. During her five-year tenure there, she became intimately familiar with the intricacies, difficulties, and balance required to cooperatively manage and restore lands for wildlife. In 1996 she served as project manager for the Center for Natural Lands Management (www.cnlm.org), an organization dedicated to management of conservation lands in perpetuity. Most recently, from 1997 to 1999, she was grants officer for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, managing the Foundation's western portfolio in support of Partners in Flight and bird conservation projects. She also conducted evaluations of federal natural resource management programs with the U.S. General Accounting Office from 1987-1991. Ms. Elliott holds a B.S. in Zoology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a Master's in Science, Technology and Public Policy from George Washington University in Washington, DC. Her articles have appeared in *California Coast & Ocean*, *Wild Earth* and other magazines for the lay public.